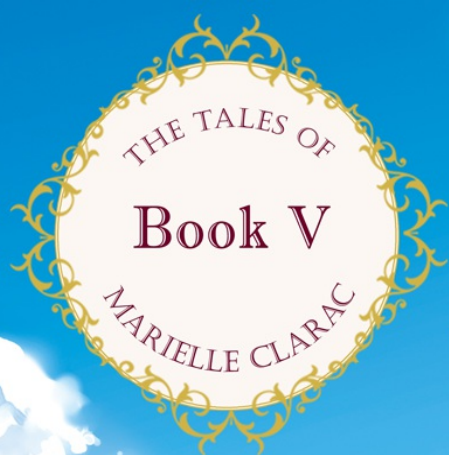




The Intrigue of *Marielle Clarac*

Author: Haruka Momo Illustrator: Maro

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THE TALES OF
Book V
MARIELLE CLARAC

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The Intrigue
of *Marielle Clarac*

❁ Donatien Flaubert

Simeon's grandfather. A former admiral who has moved away from the capital and now lives on Enciel Island.

❁ Lionel Duchesnay

A relative of Simeon's. Eldest son of the wealthy House Duchesnay, which is known for its successful shipping business.

❁ Alice Cernay

Lionel's traveling companion.

A glamorous beauty with golden brown hair.

❁ Sasha

A resident of Enciel Island. A lively lad with red hair and cat-like golden eyes.

❁ Charles

Sasha's comrade. A burly man with a beard. His friends call him "Roche."

❁ Hector Mereaux

Head of the Enciel Island branch of the Duchesnay Shipping Company. A stylishly dressed man with silvery gray hair.

❁ Albert Poisson

Captain of the Royal Order of Knights. Presents himself as friendly and jovial but has a cunning side as well.

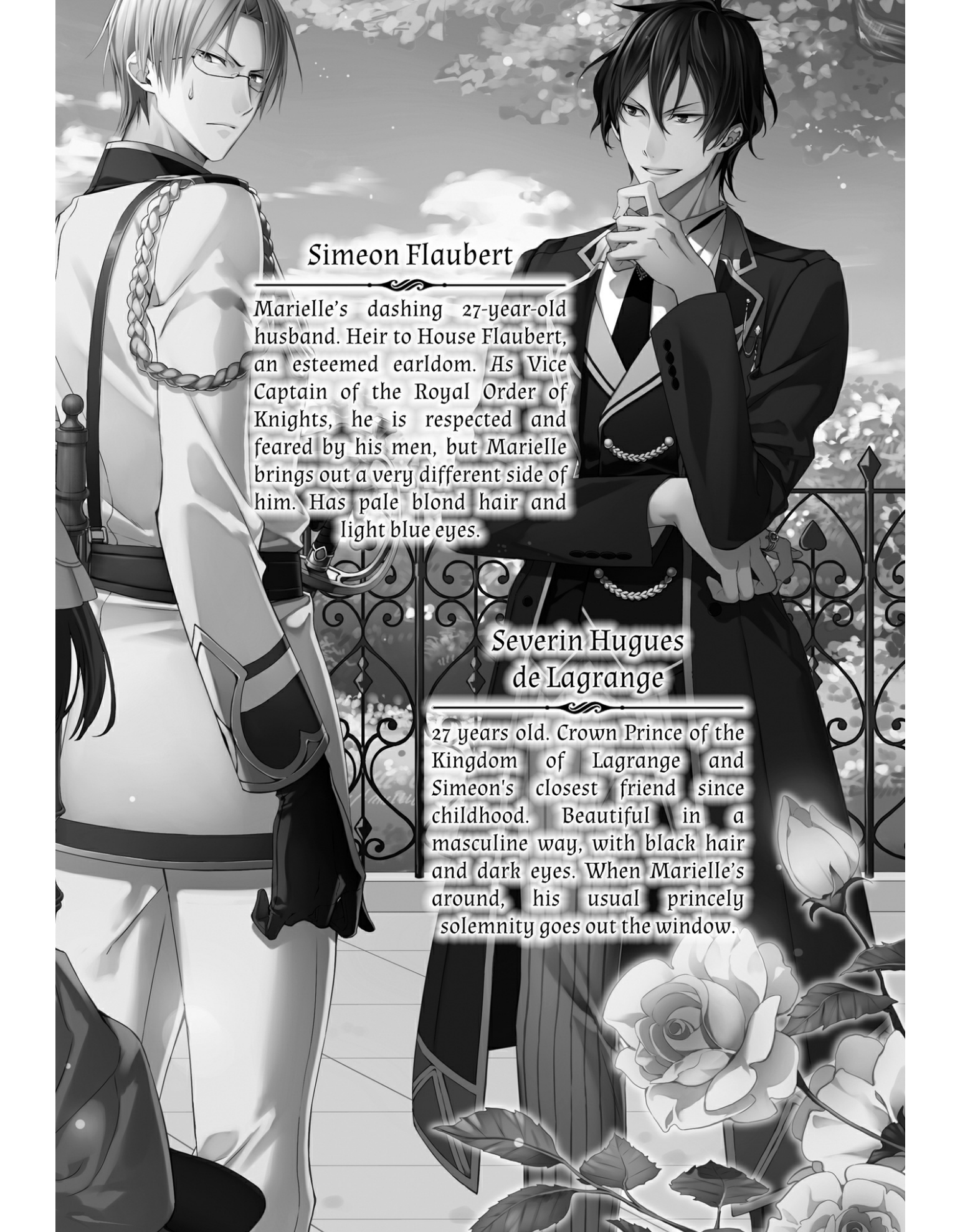
❁ Julianne Sorel

Marielle's best friend. An avid reader who likes a rather specific type of content.

Marielle Flaubert

19 years old. Daughter of Viscount Clarac. Has brown hair and brown eyes, and wears glasses. Entirely plain, with no real distinguishing qualities. Can suppress her presence, hiding in plain sight to observe people and gather information. Secretly a popular author called Agnès Vivier.





Simeon Flaubert

Marielle's dashing 27-year-old husband. Heir to House Flaubert, an esteemed earldom. As Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights, he is respected and feared by his men, but Marielle brings out a very different side of him. Has pale blond hair and light blue eyes.

Severin Hugues de Lagrange

27 years old. Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Lagrange and Simeon's closest friend since childhood. Beautiful in a masculine way, with black hair and dark eyes. When Marielle's around, his usual princely solemnity goes out the window.

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Chapter One

Bathed in glorious rays of light, the bride shows off a beaming smile.

It's her moment of supreme bliss—the very scene that every maiden dreams of and longs to experience one day. In her pure white dress, she is more joyful, more beautiful, than anyone else in the whole world. If she is sharing that day with the one she loves, her spirits cannot help but soar even higher. It's as though she has transformed into a fairy tale princess.

But...the dream does not end there. It continues ever onward. The journey to the ceremony may have been fraught with peril, but even after successfully reaching that goal, life is bursting at the seams with possibilities.

And so, the story does not simply conclude with a “happily ever after.” Quite the contrary—this was only the beginning.

After the ceremony came the reception. I doubt I'll ever forget what a frantic experience it was, or the degree to which my nerves were frayed. House Flaubert is one of the most distinguished noble houses in the country, so its circle of acquaintances is vast, and even the number of relatives in attendance was quite large. The guest list also included some highly esteemed individuals with lofty social ranks, so I couldn't let myself relax no matter how exhausted I was. I knew that, but it truly was a struggle. I was used to being beyond even a wallflower. I was typically a shadow cast by the wall, a part of the scenery that went unnoticed by everyone. That day, I had to be the exact opposite: the main focus of a large-scale celebration.

I certainly didn't have time to enjoy it! I wondered, *How on earth do fairy tale princesses cope with all this?* I had to dedicate all my efforts to enduring behind my smiling facade so that I didn't make any mistakes.

I said hello to people over and over—more times than I could count—and the last stretches are largely a blank to me, my memories too fuzzy for me to recollect much. I don't even remember leaving. At any rate, by the time I got

through it and reached our bedroom, it was late at night. After I had a bath and was blessedly able to change my clothes, the brand new silk bedsheets called to me. When I slipped into the large four-poster bed and felt its soft comfort, that was that. The next time I opened my eyes, it was morning.

“Are you awake?” said the man beside me. In the same bed, sitting up and leaning against a pillow, was Lord Simeon. He sipped at his coffee while reading a newspaper. The morning sun, shining in through the lace curtains, made his pale blond hair glow in the light.

His eyes, the color of light blue gemstones, looked towards me. His face was as beautiful as always, but as I looked over at him in a daze, I felt he had something of a different aura than usual. I began to wake up properly and noticed that his attire was different. His thin nightclothes hung loosely and showed parts of him that were usually hidden, such as his clavicle and his wrists. His smooth hair was not especially disheveled even after waking up, but it did convey a more relaxed impression, and left the nape of his neck exposed in a way that exuded an indescribable sensuality.

A beautiful voice came from his beautiful lips. “Why do you appear to be praying?”

I had linked my hands together to worship the gorgeous man who gleamed in the sunlight before me. “Such seductive appeal, so early in the morning! It’s some sort of prize, seeing the thing I fangirl over most of all right before my eyes as soon as I open them. A prize for all the efforts I went to yesterday, perhaps. I’m so happy that I could pass away into eternal sleep right now and not even mind. Oh, thank you!”

What could I do in this situation but worship, I ask you? I was seeing Lord Simeon...in the morning! Even in his civilian clothes, he always dressed rather formally, with his whole body tightly covered. But this! This was how he looked when he woke up! Seeing him in such a casual state for the first time was so amazing that it was beyond even a nosebleed! Instead, I felt my soul surging out of my body!

Lord Simeon stared for a moment, then wordlessly drained his coffee cup and put it on the small bedside table along with the folded up newspaper. “Pass

away into eternal sleep? You've only just woken up—although I suspect you're still half asleep."

"No, I'm fully awake. I've experienced a sudden shock that reverberated through my head!"

"Is that so? And how is your head feeling now?"

"Like it's been blessed! Like it's in a sacred presence!"

As soon as I answered, a large hand came down and pinched my nose.

I brushed him off, and he let out a sigh. I wondered, *Is he in something of a bad mood?* At that point, I finally sat up. I glanced around the room, looked down at myself, and then realized. *I slept together with Lord Simeon, didn't I? In the same bed, under the same sheets, both of us wearing nightclothes.*

No surprise there, of course. After all, we were married now! We had become husband and wife!

I had long since been told that this would be our marital bed. I knew that from now on, I would sleep here with Lord Simeon every night. But after the reception, I had entirely lacked the energy to be aware of that. I was so exhausted that I was practically falling over, and I couldn't think about anything except slipping under the covers.

What a thing to have done. I had slept like a log through what was supposed to be a memorable and noteworthy experience: our first night together.

"What a waste!" I cried out involuntarily.

He knitted his well-formed eyebrows. "A waste?"

"Our first night as newlyweds! That precious night that occurs only once in a lifetime... I let it end in an instant! I closed my eyes and opened them again, and it was already over! I wanted to truly savor it!"

Only now realizing the mistake I had made, I cradled my head in my hands. *Ugh, I feel such intense regret! I meant to enjoy a special night with Lord Simeon and use it to nourish my creative works!*

The lines on Lord Simeon's forehead grew deeper and he pressed a hand against his glasses. Even though it was first thing in the morning, he spoke in a

weary tone. "I'm the one who should be pitied over our first night ending in an instant. Don't worry, however. Tonight I'll ensure that you savor it very fully indeed."

I groaned. "It won't be the first night, but the *second* night! We can never get the first night back."

"In the truest sense, our 'first night' is still to come," he said offhandedly, getting up off the bed.

"What do you mean?" I replied, but he didn't turn around, instead walking straight to the door and putting his hand on it. "Lord Simeon?"

I saw the motion of his broad back as he sighed again. "It's only natural that you're feeling restless at the moment. We don't have any plans for today, so you should rest thoroughly and recover your stamina."

Even though this was our first morning as a married couple, Lord Simeon was as serious and composed as ever. He opened the door and left. *What was that? Why did he avoid meeting my gaze? Couldn't he at least have given me a good morning kiss?* We were married, after all. Even though we had exchanged vows only one day earlier, he didn't show any of the sweetness I'd have expected.

Instead, I was left in bed alone. I felt a tiny bit sullen. Still, the root cause of this was that I had fallen asleep so quickly, wasn't it? For me, what had held the sweetest appeal last night was the silk bedding. Did Lord Simeon feel disappointed because of this, I wondered?

This was our first day as newlyweds. It was a rather unfortunate start to our married life, but it did seem somehow fitting for us. Our love was like a storybook romance, but unlike in a story, everything was always slightly off-kilter. That was exactly what made every day so interesting, and why I was never bored.

Having changed my perspective, I got out of bed. I stretched hard and put on my glasses, then went over to the window and opened the curtains. Looking out, what lay before me was not the small garden I was used to from my family's home, but one large enough to fit another house two or three times over.

Grass and flower beds, a hedge maze, fountains, a gazebo, arches, and obelisks—all of it cleverly designed and always kept in perfect order by the gardeners. In this season, where spring was fast turning into summer, it was more impressive than at any other time of year. The greenery was bright and vivid, and the various flowers vied for the title of most beautiful.

The freshly blooming roses were bursting with innocent character, while in the beds of flowering plants, the stems of the campanulas poked out boldly. The paths were bordered with beds of begonias. Thick shrubbery at a low height stretched out like a ribbon over a great distance. In that manner, a variety of elements were brought together, painting a single picture across the vast canvas that was the garden.

It was magnificently planned and implemented. Gazing out at it gave the clear sense that it was a Lagrangian-style garden. While my brother's efforts in my own family's garden emphasized natural beauty, which suited his tastes, House Flaubert's garden could boast of its impeccable man-made splendor. It had a level of scale and perfection that approached the unthinkable for a private garden.

I had visited many times, so it wasn't as though I was seeing this for the first time, but it made me feel very keenly that I had entered a different world. I was part of this household now. One day, the time would come for me to take over as the lady of the house.

It still hadn't sunk in properly. It felt as though I was staying as a guest. I wondered if I would get more used to it the longer I lived here. Would I become accustomed to this huge and nonchalantly extravagant bedroom, and the living room next to it that was even more so? What about the house's luxurious salons and halls?

I turned around just as the maidservants entered to help me get ready. I said good morning to them, then set about getting dressed. As we chatted I picked out a dress and had them put my hair in order. I was glad that they all got along with me so well. However, I was not yet used to being referred to as the "young mistress," and it made me a tiny bit embarrassed.

"You had a tough time of it yesterday, didn't you?" said one of the servants.

“You should get plenty of rest today.”

“The mistress said you should take all the time you need,” said the other.
“You should simply unwind and not worry about a thing.”

“Yes, indeed!” said the first. “For Lord Simeon’s sake as well, you have to fully recover your strength and be the cheerful young lady...I mean, young mistress...that you usually are.”

In the face of their kindness, my agitation began to fade away. They created an atmosphere that let me feel as though this was indeed my own home, and it warmed my heart.

Only, am I imagining things, or does their encouragement have something of an overzealous undertone to it?

I did not learn the answer to that question until time passed and night fell once more.

I realized I had been mistaken about a lot of things...and I do mean a *lot* of things. Afterwards, I was left feeling thoroughly overwhelmed and overcome.

I was a plain young lady who did not stand out in society at all, and certainly held no appeal to suitors. I was society’s dullest wallflower, from a mid-ranking viscountcy with no particular history or achievements to its name—thoroughly mediocre in every sense.

No one could ever have expected me to marry a man who was so much like a prince. The marriage proposal that I suddenly received one day felt like such a toweringly distant prospect that if I were to try to look up and see it, I’d have to bend so far back that I would fall over.

And the one proposing to me was Simeon Flaubert, the heir to an esteemed earldom and the Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights. He was a close confidant of His Highness the Crown Prince, and it was often said that he would one day be prime minister or the Minister of Military Affairs. On top of that, he was extremely attractive, and all the young ladies of a suitable age longed to be with him.

It was such a strange occurrence that everyone in society doubted it when

they heard, but no one was more surprised than I was. Even after our engagement was made official, I suspected there was some secret reason behind it, or that it would be canceled at some point. I was neither as beautiful as the protagonist of a romance novel, nor did I have any particular merits to speak of, so naturally I didn't believe it was real.

However, I did not consider for a moment the option of refusing the proposal myself. I accepted it with joy in my heart.

How could I do otherwise!? Lord Simeon matches my tastes so perfectly! Ever since I was a child I have loved reading, and all sorts of stories have made my heart race. That interest developed into my work as a professional romance author—and in the books I've read and written, the character type that appeals to me most of all is that of the “black-hearted” gentleman. Yes, I love characters with that trait more than anything.

It's not unusual for one to turn up somewhere. They typically won't be the main character—but among the supporting cast, or perhaps in the villain role, there's often someone who appears good and virtuous at first glance, but is crafty and nefarious underneath. I tend to like such characters even more than those the story focuses on.

As someone who absolutely adores that scenario, I used to spend my day-to-day existence enthusiastically discussing it with my best friend Julianne.

Then the personification of my tastes, the very fuel for my fangirl fire, entered my life in the form of Lord Simeon. He's dashing handsome and mild-mannered, but even as he shows a refined smile, he somehow gives off a sense of being a scoundrel underneath. Behind his glasses, his eyes flash with a shrewd glint, and even with an apparently cheerful expression he is in fact relentlessly observing everyone around him. His sharp gaze will not let even the most cunning plot slip by unnoticed. He possesses an outstanding mind and a well-honed body, and he's a trusted friend of the crown prince. Even the fact that he's not the Captain but the *Vice* Captain makes him more like the classic archetype! It may be cliché, but I'm fine with that! His beautiful good looks only bring him closer to the quintessential ideal!

With all that in my mind, I let my thoughts run away with me. I became a tad

obsessed, and started to fangirl over him rather intensely. The impression of him as somehow sinister underneath was not unique to me, but one harbored by many other people—but even so, the truth turned out to be quite different. He's earnest to a fault, and a tiny bit stubborn. At his core, he's a very kind person.

I was convinced that we would have a marriage of convenience where I'd simply fangirl over the man he *appeared* to be. I was just as sure that there was some reason he had been forced to propose to me. However, the more I got to know him, the more my feelings developed, and the more I fell for the real him. It did not take especially long for me to genuinely fall in love. The stark difference between his outward appearance and his true nature only made me fangirl all the more. I found that I loved every aspect of him.

On Lord Simeon's side, there was another classic twist. It turned out that he had known who I was for quite a long time. They say that truth is stranger than fiction, but sometimes things happen in real life that are exactly like a novel. What was more common than the protagonist secretly finding out that her love interest fell in love with her before they ever met? Of course, it took an especially talented gentleman to notice someone as plain and unremarkable as me.

We had misunderstandings, disagreements, and occasionally even arguments, I suppose, but after much wrangling we finally made it to our wedding. In a story, that would be the last page. For us, however, this is merely the start of a new chapter. We still have so much ahead of us. Together with him, I'll walk the path that is the second chapter of our long lives.

That began with me being knocked for a loop by the realization that there were things—all sorts of things!—that I knew nothing about. But even so, I'm only growing happier with each passing day!

Chapter Two

The port was heaving with people as always, and the scent of the sea blew through the air. Summer was coming ever closer, day by day. White birds flew overhead in the clear blue sky. The water stretched out before my eyes, meeting the sky far in the distance. Docked at a wharf nearby was the newest model of paddle steamer.

Sans-Terre, the capital city of the Kingdom of Lagrange, is located on the coast and is an important nexus of sea traffic. However, I hardly ever traveled as far as the port. That alone was exhilarating...but more to the point, soon I would finally be boarding that ship! I had only ever gazed at the ships from dry land before. It was to be the first sea voyage of my entire life. I would soon set sail! My heart raced. I felt as though I had suddenly become a sailor in the Age of Exploration.

“Marielle, if you keep looking upwards, you’ll fall over.”

As I craned my neck to look at the ship, thoroughly engrossed, Lord Simeon put an arm around my waist and pulled me out of the way of a passing man who was about to collide with me. The port was always crammed full of people no matter what the time of day—passengers, people there to see off friends and loved ones or welcome them back, workers carrying cargo. It was that sort of place, so pickpockets and such were apparently quite common as well. Admittedly, I should have been paying a little more attention.

“Pay attention to where you’re walking,” he added. I shifted my gaze from the ship to meet his, which was somewhat exasperated. Otherwise, though, his mood was just as collected as always. I began to wonder how he could be so lacking in any excitement about our upcoming trip.

“Apologies,” I replied. “But it is rather thrilling, isn’t it? I wonder what it’s like on board.”

“The rooms and passageways will all be very cramped,” said Lord Simeon without a moment’s hesitation.

I pouted. “Try not to spoil the atmosphere, please. Cramped or otherwise, it’s a place that you don’t normally enter. Doesn’t that make your heart race?”

“I’ve traveled by sea on many occasions since my childhood days. Certainly, though, I do understand your enthusiasm.” He smiled faintly.

I bet he was just as excited the first time he went on a sea voyage. When I imagined Lord Simeon as a young boy, his spirits soaring, a thrill ran through me. He must have been so adorable! Being able to witness that sight was a hope that would never be granted, but I dearly wished otherwise.

Now that he was a fully grown adult, his face showed not even the slightest hint of elevated spirits as he took my arm. *Being escorted by a dashing handsome knight is wonderful, of course, but would it kill him to share my enthusiasm once in a while?*

But I could think that all I wanted. The fact was, he was not the kind of person to react with such enthusiasm. Besides, I was no longer a single young lady, but a married woman, so I endeavored to be elegant and ladylike as I drew closer to Lord Simeon and we made our way to the steamer company’s building.

We still had quite a while until the scheduled departure time. The ship was still being prepared and boarding had not yet begun. After checking in, we simply had to stay put in the waiting room on dry land. However, the room was vast and even provisioned with two restaurants for passengers to drink tea and enjoy a light meal. One was a high-class restaurant filled with well-dressed ladies and gentlemen, while the other was somewhat more downmarket, with patrons who appeared to be commoners.

“There are a lot of people from other countries as well,” I remarked. I could see various people nearby who were clearly, at a glance, not of Lagrangian origin. The ship we were to board, the *Decoration*, would travel to the Republic of Orta—a neighboring country to the east—then proceed on to several other countries, so there would probably be plenty of travelers returning home to these places.

We entered the restaurant and I sat down on a chair that Lord Simeon pulled out for me, while he sat opposite.

Looking around, I asked, “I wonder if any of these passengers are going to

Enciel Island like us?”

“I expect so,” he replied. “This is the perfect season to go sightseeing there.”

A waiter arrived quickly to take our order. We had eaten before leaving home, so we both only had a cup of tea.

“I’d love to go sightseeing as well! We will have time, won’t we?”

I had done a great deal of research into our destination in advance. The island was quite some distance from the city in the southeastern sea, and it had formerly been under the Republic of Orta’s authority, so visiting it had not been easy in the past. This meant that until recently, it had not had much presence in the minds of the Lagrangian populace. However, since the development of steamboat technology, which allowed for faster long-distance travel, it became possible for people to visit even distant islands such as Enciel. By now, it had turned into a well-known tourist spot. In fact, this temperate island with its many influences left over from the age of knights was apparently growing more popular by the year. I had always longed to go there one day.

Before my engagement, the furthest I could expect to travel was to visit my relatives. This was the norm not only for me, but for young ladies from good families in general. There was no way that I could ever have been permitted to go on a long journey by myself, and my father didn’t have time for long family vacations due to his work at the palace, so all I could do was listen to other people’s stories as my own longing became ever more intense.

Lord Simeon was an even busier person than Father, so it was likely that I still wouldn’t be able to travel much in the future. However, that was all the more reason to embrace my excitement and treat this as the precious opportunity it was.

Lord Simeon smiled gently as he replied to my plea. “Yes, of course. In fact, there is one particular highlight I intend to show you. A very special place indeed.” Although he wore his usual gentlemanly countenance, I caught a glimpse of boyish teasing as well. *Oh, how unusual!* My own expression softened. *I suppose for Lord Simeon, this is his territory. Perhaps for him it feels like revealing hidden treasure or some such.*

“Oh, please do,” I replied. “I’ll also do my very best when I meet your

grandfather.”

“Honestly, you needn’t be so ill at ease on that front.”

Lord Simeon said those words lightly, but I knew it was quite impossible for me to take his advice. Not when the man we were going to meet was Donatien Flaubert, the former earl, who had also served as an admiral in the navy.

I had heard many snippets of gossip about Lord Simeon’s grandfather, but I had not yet met him. By the time I made my debut, he had long since retired, moved away from the capital, and started living on Enciel Island, so there had been no opportunity for us to meet. Even after we got engaged he had not visited to be introduced to his grandson’s future wife, which had nothing to do with me personally, but rather with Lord Simeon’s busy schedule. He was also an elderly man, making it difficult for him to travel long distances, so he also hadn’t attended our wedding a few days ago.

“I do hope he likes me,” I said. “He didn’t object to our marriage, did he?”

Though I normally wasn’t bothered by such things, I was quite nervous about meeting him for the first time. Even putting aside the huge disparity between someone like me and the former head of a prestigious house, he was the man who had educated Lord Simeon. It was not the more academically minded current earl, but the *former* earl who had raised Lord Simeon into a first-rate military man.

Lord Simeon’s obstinacy was such that people sometimes described him not only as “serious,” but as “too damned serious.” His combat skills were often described as “superhuman” or compared to those of a monster. All of this was due to his grandfather, Lord Donatien, which had naturally given me some idea of what the grandfather himself was like.

“Not in the slightest,” Lord Simeon replied. “I made the decision, and my parents accepted it, so he would certainly have no reason to object.”

“You’ve told him clearly about my family background?”

“Of course. In any case, House Clarac is an entirely legitimate house with nothing that can be said against it. Your mother and father are fine people, and the heir, your older brother, is consistently producing good results in his work.

You're from a perfectly fine family that surely presents no reason to feel inferior at all."

"Well, I hope your grandfather feels the same."

I took a breath. I loved my family very much, of course. Father's stomach was beginning to protrude more and more lately—he perhaps needed to reevaluate his lifestyle—while Mother was quite a gossip and should really be more careful about what she said to whom. My brother Gerard, meanwhile, needed to get a move on and be less interested in flowers and more interested in women. However, all of them were good, kind people. It wasn't as though I was embarrassed about them. It was simply that from a societal perspective, we were an insignificant viscountcy, and I feared that Lord Donatien might see us as unworthy of forming a connection with his house.

But at this point, all I could hope to do was my best. I had neither good looks nor great wit, so I would have to somehow make up for it through hard work. If I could be deemed sufficient to marry into House Flaubert, in turn I expected that my own house's reputation would be improved.

I decided that, while visiting Enciel Island, I would be very careful and behave in a thoroughly proper manner. *For now, I'll suppress my fangirling ways and be a perfectly normal and docile young lady—or rather, wife. Or perhaps "new bride" is better? Oh no, I suppose that has a slightly different implication. Oh, in this case maybe it's more relevant that I'm the "young mistress" of the household?*

No sooner had I thought about suppressing my fangirling ways than I immediately felt myself smiling gleefully. *"Wife" has such a nice ring to it, doesn't it? It conveys such a feeling of sensuality. I'm Lord Simeon's wife. Yes, his wife!*

"I won't ask what you're thinking about," said Lord Simeon, "but once we're on board, pay close attention to where you're walking and who's around you. If you fall into the sea, there will be no way to rescue you." Having noticed that I was lost in imagination again, Lord Simeon dragged me back to reality. His face was less like that of a husband and more like that of a teacher or parent.

An announcement was made that we should start boarding. Everyone around

us started to move, and Lord Simeon and I left the restaurant as well.

The servants were waiting for us in the lobby. Two attendants would be accompanying us on this voyage. In general, a noblewoman would never travel without a lady's maid, and Lord Simeon also wanted to enjoy his time away from work as much as possible, so he had brought along a male servant to take care of various odd jobs.

When Daniel and Joanna saw us, they walked over to us straight away.

"My lord, some customs officials asked to inspect your luggage," said Daniel with a somewhat troubled look.

Lord Simeon's face took on a quizzical expression. "Why? Was there some sort of problem?"

"I'm not sure. They didn't provide any details. They merely said they wanted to inspect the contents of the suitcases. Naturally, I told them that the suitcases held the possessions of the eldest son of House Flaubert and his esteemed wife, but they refused to back down. For now I've insisted that they wait, as it would be quite inappropriate for them to open them without your permission. As of now, though, the luggage can't be loaded onto the ship."

"Understood," said Lord Simeon immediately with a nod. He turned to me. "Marielle, please wait here."

"Can't I go with you?" The luggage we had left in the servants' care included my possessions as well, of course. "Wouldn't it be better for me to be present?"

"They wouldn't do anything as improper as opening a lady's luggage. I'll go and speak with them directly."

"All right," I replied. Lord Simeon left the lobby with Daniel, and I turned to Joanna. "I wonder what's the matter? If our bags are being investigated by customs, do they suspect us of smuggling contraband or some such?"

"They did seem to be implying that, but it's a thoroughly rude suggestion to make of a member of House Flaubert," said Joanna, looking and sounding rather put out.

Joanna was the lady's maid provided for me by my mother-in-law, Countess

Estelle, when I married into the family. She was rather beautiful, with chocolate-colored hair and kindly green eyes. At twenty-one years old, she was still young, as was Daniel. He seemed to be interested in using this trip as a chance to grow closer to her, but from what I could tell, she did not reciprocate that desire at all. Perhaps with my own disposition in mind, Countess Estelle had chosen a lady's maid for me who had a firm temperament and came across as an older sister in her attitude.

"I don't understand why they would accuse us like that. What in the world have we done to invite suspicion? What could ever be suspicious about the illustrious House Flaubert!?" Joanna spoke in an imperious manner; perhaps the customs official's attitude had been particularly offensive. "Frankly, how dare they force the young master to attend to this matter himself. We'll need to have those officials properly raked over the coals later."

I tried to soothe her with a strained smile. "Well, it is their job, I suppose. What else can they do?"

I didn't know what sort of interaction had taken place, but either way, if customs had any doubts, it was their duty to investigate it. Misunderstanding or otherwise, if they asked, we had to obey.

That said, Lord Simeon had seemed confident that they wouldn't open my own luggage. My travel cases were filled with my various changes of clothes, so naturally I didn't want anyone rummaging through them. Still, I'd have expected an objection like that to be ignored. This was no doubt the time for power and influence to shine. I doubted that the customs workers would be able to insist very hard in the face of a man like Lord Simeon.

However, in that case the situation would require the use of some metaphorical arm-twisting, which was quite unlike Lord Simeon. In this instance, his "too damned serious" nature was giving way to his concern for my needs, which was slightly unexpected but very welcome indeed.

I glanced over at the steamer company's reception desk. "Oh, that's right. We should be able to get a map of the inside of the ship. I'll go and ask for it now."

Most of the passengers had left to board already. The lobby, which had previously been jam packed, was now largely empty, so I wouldn't have to wait

in line. I took a few casual steps toward the desk.

Suddenly I received a blow to my side, knocking me over. As I tumbled to the floor, a tut and a cry of abuse descended from above me. “Out of my way, you ugly cow!”

This classless jeering made me certain it was a commoner, but when I lifted my head, I saw an unexpectedly well-dressed young man.

Joanna rushed over to help me up. “My lady!”

I was still shocked by what had happened and continued to stare blankly up at the man. If I were to judge based solely on his clothes, he was either a nobleman or a similarly wealthy middle-class man. He was probably a little younger than Lord Simeon, and although his ferocious expression made him look rough and violent at first glance, beneath his well-tailored clothes he appeared to be rather thin. Being used to seeing military officers by now, I was able to tell immediately whether someone had a trained physique or not. I was confident that this man did not have much personal experience of combat.

Our eyes met for only a moment before the man huffed and carried on walking. The young woman accompanying him looked at me and giggled, then followed after him. They both went over the reception desk, usurping my own plan.

“Are you all right, my lady?” asked Joanna as she dusted off my dress. “You’re not hurt?”

I shook my head and stood up at last. “I was just a little startled, that’s all.” I paused to consider. “Did I jump out in front of that man or some such?”

I couldn’t deny that I had been in high spirits in anticipation of my first sea voyage. With the crowd having thinned out so much, I had been focused entirely on the reception desk, and had largely ignored my surroundings. It was not inconceivable that I had gotten in his way without realizing it.

But Joanna firmly denied this. “No, not at all. Technically you were in his path, but there was more than enough distance for him to walk around you. Any sensible person wouldn’t have collided with you. Even if he was staunchly determined to reach the desk first, the most he should have done was rush

past. Intentionally barging into you and knocking you over was rude beyond belief! What an unpleasant brute of a man.”

“Hmm, I suppose.” Wondering if this meant I didn’t need to apologize, I took back my handbag, which Joanna had picked up for me.

Although the suddenness of it had surprised me, this was a relatively common occurrence in crowded places. The world does not consist only of ladies and gentlemen. There are also those who dress well, but whose inner nature does not measure up to their appearance. It would be unexpected in a place frequented exclusively by the upper class, but we were in the city, so rude behavior was far from unheard of.

Lord Simeon doesn’t change his behavior depending on where he is or who he encounters, though. He always acts like a gentleman! That aspect of him was what really demonstrated his humanity.

I can’t say that being pushed over wasn’t unpleasant, but rather than remaining annoyed about it forever, I decided it was better to take it as another useful experience to channel into my writing. *I’m sure I’ll find some situation where I can use this.*

I pulled myself together and looked over at the desk. If I went over now, I’d come into contact with that man and woman again, so it seemed better to wait for them to finish their business and leave.

Just as I was considering that, the man’s rough voice could be heard again. “What!? Not available!? That is unacceptable! I informed you of my arrival in advance!”

The brute was leaning over the counter and shouting at the employee. His voice was so loud, and his attitude so menacing, that the eyes of everyone remaining in the lobby, without exception, were drawn to him immediately.

“I’m terribly sorry,” the employee replied, “but as I’m sure you’ve been informed already, both premium cabins are already reserved.” Despite looking slightly terrified, he said exactly what he was supposed to say. He no doubt had to deal with all sorts of customers every single day, so merely being shouted at wouldn’t be enough to make him give into fear.

“Who gives a damn!?” the man thundered. “I told you that I want to book one of them! Me! Swap the reservations at once!”

“Sir, we are unable to do that. I can arrange a first class cabin, so perhaps you could use that instead?”

“How dare you!? Do you take me for some kind of idiot!?”

From this brief exchange, it was clear that he was a highly irrational and overbearing person. Glancing around, I saw stunned faces and grimaces everywhere.

An elderly man who appeared to be some sort of royalty glared coldly. *He must be boarding our ship as well. I’ve no doubt that one of the two premium cabins has been reserved by him.*

As for the other, to lay all my cards on the table at this point, it was reserved by Lord Simeon and myself. This was a popular route, so we had booked it several months in advance. The steamer company was managed by a relative of House Flaubert, so it was possible that Lord Simeon had pulled a few strings, but it wasn’t as though we had driven other people away and forcibly taken their reservation from them. We had sought out an available cabin and taken it, so we could justifiably feel that our booking took priority.

If Lord Simeon had been there with me, I would have unreservedly watched the argument proceed. However, given that we two women were there alone, I was worried about getting involved in a confrontation. It didn’t seem especially likely that the employee would suggest discussing it with the passengers concerned, but even so, I decided it was best to move away slightly to avoid notice.

“Joanna, let’s make ourselves scarce,” I whispered furtively.

She nodded in understanding. “Indeed. We wouldn’t want to be embroiled in this ourselves.”

It seemed she had been thinking the same as me. She led the way over to a column some distance away that we could stand behind. *Perfect! I’m sure we won’t attract any attention here.* It was also quite close to the exit, so when Lord Simeon returned he would see us straight away.

I felt the tension leave my shoulders. *Hiding like this really lets me relax. Standing in an inconspicuous place like this, or even just standing quietly and blending into the background—that's when I feel most like myself. All this time recently that I've had to spend being the center of attention? That's what's abnormal!*

When I suggested as much to Joanna, she replied, "You are not an insect hiding under a rock, but the young mistress of House Flaubert. You shouldn't be saying such things."

She sounded exasperated, but honestly, I believe that individuals have their own strengths and weaknesses. *I'm simply the kind of person who prefers not to attract attention. What's wrong with that?*

Over by the reception desk the man was continuing to protest. I surreptitiously poked my head out from behind the column to see what was happening. Another man had appeared who seemed to be the employee's boss. Perhaps he had decided that this was more than his subordinate could handle alone.

In these situations, it was common for the unreasonable customer to be driven away with a statement such as "The exit is that way, sir," but the boss seemed to be dealing with the man rather timidly. Was this customer really a man of high enough status to justify such deference? I didn't recall ever seeing his face before. I'd caught a good glimpse of him after he knocked me over, and if he was someone who tended to be seen in high society, I'd certainly have known who he was. It was possible that he wasn't a nobleman, but an extremely wealthy middle-class man. *Even so, he could do with having a little more class.*

In the end, the customer was forced to back down, his demands unmet. He retreated with an incredibly dissatisfied expression, delivering a kick to the counter in revenge as he turned around. He started walking briskly back towards the exit, so I pulled my head back and hid behind the column. His footsteps made quite a sound as he shot past.

"Lionel, wait!" cried the lady accompanying him. Although she was half-running to try to keep up with him, he appeared to make no effort to consider

her.

My word, he really is no gentleman at all. I peered out from behind the column again to watch him leave. “What a character,” I murmured.

As if she could no longer contain her anger, Joanna practically spat out her thoughts. “Even putting aside his violent behavior toward you, he had not the slightest hint of good decorum about him! He’s *nouveau riche*, I’m sure of it. He suddenly found himself with money and has no idea how to behave with it. No matter how finely they dress up, people always betray their origins.”

I was not so sure of this. Certainly I couldn’t describe him as a gentleman, and he had spoken in a harsh and threatening manner, but his pronunciation and use of language had not been coarse. That was not something that could be learned overnight, so despite his behavior I thought he might have had a good upbringing.

Now that the initial shock was gone, curiosity had reared its head. I could imagine all sorts of potential backstories for someone who was raised well but now behaved in a vulgar manner. *He’s probably traveling on the same steamer as us, isn’t he? I wonder if I’ll be able to secretly observe him.* I hadn’t had many interactions with such crude men, so all the male love interests I’d written about so far were virtuous figures. But sometimes a gritty hero holds some appeal as well, does it not? I could just picture it—a man who’s initially quite scary, but on the inside he’s a sensitive soul who’s hiding some deep wounds. Then he’s saved from his complicated past by the protagonist, who changes his life... And at the end he falls in love with her, and their intense passion drives the reader wild...

A voice faded in.

“...elle? Marielle?”

When he tapped my shoulder, I suddenly returned to reality. *Wait, when did Lord Simeon return? And when did I get out my notebook and start writing?*

“Oh, you’re back,” I said. “Did you resolve the situation?”

I closed my notebook, and Lord Simeon did not make any comment on it. In his light blue eyes it was clear that he saw everything. *Yes, I had a sudden flash*

of inspiration, that's all. Nothing to worry about.

“More or less,” he replied instead. “It seems that because there is a great deal of cargo under the name of House Flaubert, they found it a little suspicious that we would be boarding ourselves.”

“That’s why they were suspicious? But...we’re not even traveling to a foreign country, but to one of Lagrange’s own territories. Surely there could be nothing funny going on?”

The “cargo” in question presumably referred to something separate from our luggage. The *Decoration* also carried freight, so there would be goods on board that were being transported to the island as well. Were they so quick to assume we might be smuggling contraband goods? In any case, could shipping within a country even count as smuggling?

I expressed these concerns, but Lord Simeon responded with little more than a shrug. I had a sense that he knew something but was perhaps unable to talk about it here in public.

“What about you?” he asked. “Did something happen? Why are you hiding?”

Joanna reacted before I did. Sensing that she was going to tell Lord Simeon everything, I turned to her before she could open her mouth. “Joanna, could you go and ask for a map of the ship?” With my eyes, I told her not to say anything.

“Yes, my lady,” she said after a moment, nodding with a distinct look of displeasure. She walked off toward the reception desk.

Hehehe. Stop staring at me so pointedly, Lord Simeon. It hurts. He was the sort of person who would never let anything pass by unnoticed, even if the awkward moment had lasted only a second.

“Marielle?” he asked.

“There was a man making a big fuss at the reception desk, that’s all. He wanted to book one of the premium cabins, and he started insisting quite vehemently after being told they were both reserved. I didn’t want to get involved, so I hid over here. Meanwhile, I took the chance to observe his behavior.”

I looked at Lord Simeon with a secretive smile. If I said that I had been knocked over he would certainly have gotten angry, so I decided to keep that to myself. I was finally about to go on my first ever sea voyage, so I didn't want to be starting any arguments with other passengers. I hadn't even been hurt. It seemed better to simply forget all about it.

"He stirred up my creative urges quite a bit," I continued. "With a little reworking, I think I could use him in my next book."

Lord Simeon's glasses glinted coldly as he stared back at me without a word. It was clear that he was not satisfied by my explanation. Still, I maintained a look of innocence. I wanted to fully enjoy the trip, and that would hopefully include finding more opportunities to observe that man. I didn't want Lord Simeon to start quarreling with him.

Lord Simeon put an arm around me and whispered into my ear. "Well, perhaps I'll ask you later when we have a little more privacy."

His breath tickled and made my body tremble. *Ooh, all of a sudden I'm remembering...all sorts of things. His lips, his hands, the things he did with them... Goodness gracious, now is NOT the time to have my mind filled with all that!* In an instant, my face grew hot.

As I froze up, he let out a chuckle. "If you'd prefer me not to force it out of you, it would be prudent to be honest with me. I believe I've already made you fully aware of how little endurance you really have."

"N-no," I managed, "don't talk like that, as if I'm keeping a secret from you. I'm the one who wants answers. Later I hope you'll tell me everything about your conversation with the customs officials." I pleaded my case with a hint of desperation, filling my voice with as much charm as I could. *Honestly now! Don't make me remember all that in public like this! What if people heard us? It would be so embarrassing!*

But despite my fervent objections, he did not yield an inch. Now I truly did become embarrassed, and I looked around to see if anyone was watching, but fortunately we were largely hidden from view and it did not seem like there was anyone paying attention. *Well, I suppose it's not such a surprise. There are some people who engage in lusty behavior and don't even care if others can see. I*

didn't know if I felt relieved, exactly. The situation was still rather troubling.
Someone should come and stop Lord Simeon!

When I cast my eyes around hoping for rescue, Daniel held back—or rather, he kept his position some distance from us, looking away as if he could not bear to watch.

Chapter Three

My heart raced as we boarded the ship. Once inside, my overriding impression was that it was indeed fairly cramped.

That said, the interior design was by no means shabby. I'd describe it as rather extravagant, in fact. The passageways in the section that held the first class and premium cabins were all lined with carpets, and the walls and ceilings had no lack of decorative elements, overall creating the atmosphere of a noble manor. I also peered into the restaurant on the way past, and could see that it was outfitted with low-key yet elegant furnishings.

We were led to our premium cabin. It was decorated in such a way that it could easily match up to House Flaubert's drawing room in terms of style. Chairs with luxurious upholstery surrounded an imposing table with a marble top and engraved legs. There was even a silver vase with roses in it. There was no chandelier, perhaps due to fears of it shaking while at sea; instead, on the walls were several ornate lamps.

The deep pile carpet felt soft under our shoes as we stepped inside. It was almost possible to forget that I was inside a means of transportation and not a house.

Our cabin was separated into a living room and a bedroom, and there was even a room for the servants right next door. I suppose this level of luxury was to be expected from a type of cabin of which the ship had only two, and that came at a correspondingly high price. It would have been fine for us to be somewhat less extravagant and stay in a first class room, but Lord Simeon had presumably wanted to make our honeymoon feel as special as possible.

This was a place I would feel very comfortable staying in. So what if it was a tiny bit cramped?

Honestly, it *was* rather confined. I couldn't deny that. The cabin and all the passageways I'd seen were rather narrow, and had low ceilings as well. Even my old bedroom in my family home was larger than this cabin. The dimensions

stood out in stark contrast to the opulent decor. Still, it only made me more aware that I had stepped out of my everyday life into a different kind of place altogether, and that was rather exciting. *If it was as big as a normal room, I wouldn't even know I wasn't on land! This lets me enjoy the voyage more fully, I'd say.*

After looking around the room, I didn't even sit down or drop my handbag before I was struck by the urge to explore. "Lord Simeon, I'd like to go and look around the ship right away. Would that be all right?" We had spent plenty of time relaxing before we boarded, so now was the time for activity.

Lord Simeon smiled in a way that suggested he was quite reluctant. "I suspected you might say that. Right now there's still a lot of commotion on board, however. We should wait until the ship departs."

"I'll be careful not to get in anybody's way. Don't worry, moving around without anyone noticing my presence is my specialty!"

"You should actually aim for the opposite in this case. Try to keep your presence noticeable. On a ship, it could cause quite some trouble if you start worming your way into unknown places."

"Keep my presence noticeable? Oh dear, that sounds far more difficult. How do I do that?"

Lord Simeon stared silently for a moment, then sighed and turned to Joanna and Daniel. "We're going out for a while. Please see to things here."

"Very well, my lord."

"Yes, take care."

Accompanied by Lord Simeon, I left the cabin. We went from the passenger quarters to the section with the restaurant and the hall. The hall had tables for enjoying a cup of tea and couches for relaxation. At the far end was a small stage. Concerts would apparently be held during the voyage, and a band had boarded for that purpose. Passengers staying in first class or above could enter freely, but second class passengers and below would have to pay extra to get in. The entry fee was rather expensive by commoners' standards, however, and there was also a dress code, so very few second class passengers, and certainly

none from third class, were likely to attend.

Lord Simeon and various nearby crew members explained all this to me as we walked around the ship. Most of the facilities were clearly divided between those meant for commoners and those meant for the wealthy. The style of decoration used for each was also completely different. On a ship, people who wouldn't normally move in the same circles were sharing the same space. The issue wasn't only that they had paid different fees, but that if people from different classes weren't separated, it could easily lead to conflict.

There were people who furrowed their brows at the mere presence of commoners among them. To a certain extent I could understand it in this context, as their reservations would have been so much more expensive.

However, when one went up onto the deck, the separation based on class no longer applied. This was one area that could not be divided. While the adults still kept their distance, their children, who weren't aware of any such concerns, ran around all over the place, frolicking together.

Observing the people around us, I approached the side of the boat. When I looked down over the handrail, the cargo was still being loaded.

"Don't lean out too far," came the swift warning from behind. *Does Lord Simeon see me in the same way as all these children? I am a grown-up, you know! I'm being careful! Why have you grabbed me? I'm not going to fall!*

"Marielle," he said, but I quickly interrupted.

"Is all this cargo being delivered to Enciel Island, I wonder? Or is some of it planned for export to foreign countries? Speaking of which, perhaps you'll finally tell me what the customs officers said to you."

"I told you not to lean forward like that. Anyway, they phrased it all rather vaguely, but it sounded as though they received a tip-off from somebody. They had some suspicions about us before we even arrived."

"Goodness, how rude." I turned back to face him. "But why would they suspect House Flaubert of smuggling? Is your family even exporting any goods to other countries?"

Lord Simeon shook his head vaguely. "We do handle some business like that,

but it's always from inland territories, so we primarily use overland routes. When we use coastal routes, it's mainly for imports. It's not as though this ship is packed full of goods for export. All the cargo under the name of House Flaubert is bound for Enciel Island."

"Then there's no cause for suspicion, is there?"

"Indeed there is not." Though he readily agreed, Lord Simeon appeared to be considering something. I wondered if he had some sort of guess about the truth behind this. Upon noticing that I was staring, he smiled as if to reassure me. "There's no need to be overly concerned. It was clear they didn't have any proof they considered definitive. I've no doubt it was a simple mistake, or perhaps someone trying to play a malicious trick. Such things do happen."

"I'd hate for it to happen too often," I replied.

He might have been trying to put me at ease, but his efforts were not very effective. Having pranks like that played on us could be quite inconvenient.

Though Lord Simeon was held in very high esteem, the other side of that coin was that many people were jealous of him. He had faced some backlash from within the military, and there were also those amongst the nobility who bore him ill will. They say the nail that sticks out gets hammered down, and naturally there are plenty of people ready and willing to hammer down any nails that start making themselves too conspicuous.

Perhaps one of those had done a little research and found out that we would be departing today. If so, they could have targeted us with their malice. It was honestly quite unpleasant and annoying.

"It's all right," said Lord Simeon gently, putting an arm around my shoulders. "It won't cause us any great difficulty."

"I hope not."

I somehow couldn't shake my unease over this matter. Still, I didn't want to give in to despair when we were about to depart on this long-awaited trip. I tried to put it out of my mind for now, deciding that if Lord Simeon stated plainly that it would be fine, I should believe him. I looked out over the handrail again and watched the work going on at ground level.

As I did, I momentarily felt my eyes meet those of someone looking up towards us. It was one of the laborers loading the cargo. With my poor eyesight I couldn't make out his face at this distance, but I could tell that he had fiery red hair. It was rare to see hair in such a vibrant shade of red.

It might have been my imagination, given how blurry he was in the distance, but it definitely felt like he was looking at us. I stared as well, wondering why that might be. However, the man soon returned to his work and disappeared from view entirely. Perhaps he'd just been idly looking around. Lord Simeon was next to me, and naturally there were plenty of people whose eyes were drawn to him. In particular, the women nearby were quite focused on Lord Simeon. If I hadn't been there, I sensed that many of them would have tried to strike up a conversation.

"A first encounter on board a ship," I said to myself. "Yes, the blue sky and the vast ocean will open their hearts as well."

"What are you talking about all of a sudden?"

"Meanwhile, in a closed off corner of the ship, there's some sort of hidden chamber. Will that be the starting point for a romance...or a crime? Ah, and when it comes to a ship, there of course has to be a stowaway! A vicious criminal hiding out on board—and anything could happen!"

"You say 'anything could happen,' but in reality he'd simply be arrested the moment he was discovered."

"But what if a crew member was secretly a co-conspirator?"

"The pair of them would be thrown into the sea."

Lord Simeon responded with plain indifference to my impromptu brainstorming session. *It's no use. With a man like Lord Simeon in the story, the criminal would have no chance of winning.* I couldn't think of any plot he wouldn't foil at the opening stages. I wanted the male love interest to be dashing and impressive, playing an active role in the story, but an ending that requires some struggle to reach is always more moving, so there had to be some obstacles.

We spent some more time looking around. By the time we returned to the

cabin, the ship had long since departed. Naturally, I had made sure to get a close-up view of the moment of departure. So far I had written so much in my notebook that I had already run out of space. I'd filled some pages with sketches as well. *Thank goodness I thought to bring a new notebook with me.*

"Shall we stay in our cabin for dinner?" suggested Lord Simeon. "We can have food brought here."

But I smiled and shook my head. "No, that would be a terrible waste. I *have* to experience the on-board restaurant!"

"I thought you might say that. Well then, we had better get ready."

No particular dress code was demanded for breakfast or lunch, but for dinner, formal clothes were required for the first class and premium passengers. Since we were still in our travel clothes, this meant getting changed.

Lord Simeon used the living room first while I waited in the bedroom. We didn't have individual rooms inside the cabin, so taking turns like that was the only way we could manage. Getting changed in front of one another was not an option. Well, admittedly I had already seen everything. The muscles hidden beneath his clothes, his smooth skin, his sensuous clavicle, and plenty more besides—I had seen it all up close! My word, I barely even had to think back to it before my head felt like it was on fire. *But I mustn't forget about it either. This is essential fuel for my creative work as well!* I was so torn, it was impossible to keep my presence of mind.

Putting all that aside, getting dressed was a somewhat different affair. This was a scene that you weren't supposed to let others see; you'd excuse yourself even from family members. Even without him having to say anything, I temporarily shut myself away in the bedroom.

It doesn't take too long for a gentleman to get dressed, however, and this applies doubly so in Lord Simeon's case, so the door opened after only a brief wait. He appeared before me clad from head to toe in an entirely suitable formal style, with a black tailcoat, white waistcoat, and cravat. The clothes hugged his tall frame and emphasized his well-honed physique, and I found myself enchanted by him all over again. Despite the clothes being rather plain and lacking in any unique characteristics, he managed to wear them incredibly

well and look remarkably dashing.

“I’ll be on the observation deck,” said Lord Simeon. “It’s still early, so don’t feel any need to rush. Take all the time you need to get ready.” Then he left with Daniel in tow.

Joanna set about helping me get dressed with great gusto. While we waited we had already discussed which dress I would wear, so she quickly brought out shoes and accessories to match.

“Let’s make you really glamorous! How would you feel about this diamond necklace?”

“Isn’t it a tiny bit too showy? We’re only going to dinner.”

The dress was a lovely shade of blue. Since I was a married woman now, the skirt was less puffy than I was used to. It also lacked the larger decorative elements of the dresses I’d worn before, with only smaller, more understated ribbons and artificial flowers. To make up for it, lace was used in abundance, and the fabric and embroidery had more intricate designs. Though unmarried young ladies’ dresses may have been more fancy, a grown-up dress like this won out in terms of sheer sophistication and class. Either way, a dress made under the direction of Countess Estelle could never be described as safe or inoffensive. I felt a bit uneasy, worrying that my outfit would be too glamorous to suit me. If the goal was to make me shine like a jewel, however, it was absolutely effective.

“I don’t think so at all,” Joanna replied. “The mistress wouldn’t choose anything that wouldn’t suit you.”

“She’s deliberately pushing the boundaries. Anyway, I’d prefer the aquamarine necklace, please.”

I decided it would be better to put the diamond necklace aside for now and save it for a situation that required that level of flashiness. This was just dinner, so I asked her to bring out a more subdued option.

It also happened to be one for which I had a particular fondness. I had received it from Lord Simeon as a new year’s present. It was the same color as his eyes, so my heart raced every time I wore it. Having said that, the diamond

one was a present from him as well. It wasn't that I didn't like it, of course. I just felt a little daunted by it.

With an off-the-shoulder dress and my hair up, I exuded far more of a grown-up atmosphere than usual. Since this was evening formal wear, the neckline was also rather deep, emphasizing my meager bosom, tragic as that was.

"Don't worry, all is well!" said Joanna in response to my misgivings. "You look polished and refined. You have the air of an innocent young wife. It's perfectly charming."

"I hope so, but..."

Despite praising me with all her might, Joanna could not deny that I was entirely lacking in seductive appeal. I thanked her despite my severely mixed feelings, took the matching purse with me, and left the cabin.

I walked along the carpeted passageway and headed to the observation deck, nodding every so often to people I passed along the way. When I climbed the stairs and went outside, the wind, which had grown cold by now, blew against my bare shoulders.

I was eager to find Lord Simeon, and a quick glance around was enough to locate him straight away on the relatively small deck. However, just as I was about to call out to him, my feet froze in place.

What a beautiful sight it was to see Lord Simeon leaning back against the handrail and gazing out at the sea. His blond hair fluttered in the wind, bathed in the light of the setting sun. His slender frame truly was so wonderfully proportioned. Even though he was doing no more than casually standing there, it was enough to be captivating. Not only because of his physique, you realize. His posture also made him look like a work of art. His striking good looks appeared somehow somber, making me hesitate to speak. Women standing nearby had all their attention on him, but none of them moved any closer. Before us was a kind of beauty that made you hold your breath—that you wanted to stare at without touching. He had all the perfection of a painting.



Hooray for this voyage! Hooray that we are traveling together! Just being able to witness this spectacle makes it worth having lived up to this day. The usual sight of him in uniform with a saber by his side—the resplendent knight serving in the palace—was precious as well, but it was supremely marvelous to look at Lord Simeon away from the city, standing still on board a ship. I wondered how on earth I could ever convey this feeling in words. How could mere letters on a page, which didn’t bestow any sense of sight, hope to convey the intensity of this moment to my readers and make them fangirl as much as I was?

“Once again, why do you appear to be praying? I fear you may be looking at something that’s invisible to other people.”

When I looked up, Lord Simeon was facing toward me. *Oh. While I was holding off on calling out to him, he must have spotted me here.*

“No, Lord Simeon! Don’t return to reality! You mustn’t interrupt this wondrous scene!”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

Lord Simeon moved away from the handrail and walked over to me. *Heavens above! The wondrous spectacle, it’s gone! But the sight of him walking straight towards me also makes my heart pound. It’s like seeing a beautifully dashing man step out of a painting and into the real world. Does “man” do him justice? Isn’t he more like an angel or a spirit? Well, he doesn’t have that sort of transient and wishy-washy feeling, I suppose. He’s more imposing and powerful. Yes, I’ve got it! He’s a war god! Indeed, Lord Simeon isn’t just beautiful—he’s a being that defines the very nature of strength and power!*

“Ma...ri...elle!” he said through gritted teeth. He lightly rapped my forehead, bringing me back to the real world from the realms of my overwhelming delusions. “If you’re ready, let’s go to the restaurant.”

“Yes, let’s!”

He offered his arm to me and I took it, and together we went back down the stairs I had just ascended. *Ah, I’m so glad to have seen something so special. I feel fully satisfied before even eating dinner.*

As we walked side by side, Lord Simeon looked at my outfit. “I see you opted

for that necklace.”

“Yes,” I replied. “It is just dinner, after all. It seemed better not to be *too* ostentatious. And it matches the dress so nicely.”

“It’s a rather delightful outfit. You have more of a grown-up air about you.”

At those last words, my heart leapt. “Really!? You...don’t think it’s unbecoming of me?”

“Not at all. I’d say it’s entirely befitting.”

This was Lord Simeon, so he wouldn’t start stringing together flowery expressions of praise. He kept his comments plain and succinct. However, that in itself gave his words a trustworthy quality. I knew he wasn’t lying, and that made me happy.

Wearing clothes that expressed my married status made me feel a ticklish sense of joy, but still left me feeling somewhat uncomfortable. I had only just turned nineteen, and on top of that I looked slightly younger than my age, so I was worried that it made me appear as though I was trying too hard. Being in Lord Simeon’s company only made me feel more self-conscious. It was a little late to still be worrying that we were mismatched as a couple, but I still didn’t want to look too childlike beside him. That’s why it made me so pleased to hear him tell me I looked grown up.

I nestled up against his arm. He looked down at me with a tender gaze, and I could tell that Lord Simeon, too, was enjoying our time together. Savoring the sweet feeling of being a newlywed couple, we made our way to the restaurant.

We had sent word in advance, so a table had already been reserved for us. We were seated by the window and had a lovely view. The sea and sky blended together in a red-orange haze that faded into a deep blue curtain.

Lord Simeon turned down the offer of an aperitif, but I enjoyed a light glass of champagne. *I wouldn’t mind at all if he got drunk in my presence, though. I’d love him to fawn all over me again.* I wondered if he might indulge if we were at home rather than in public.

“It feels even more luxurious than the restaurants in the city,” I commented, taking a glance around as we began our meal. Round tables with white cloths

were arranged evenly throughout the room. For families with children they were slightly cramped, but most tables were occupied by couples like us or individual guests.

“This degree of luxury isn’t especially unusual, is it?” Lord Simeon replied. “It might be rare for an ordinary noblewoman, but you’ve enjoyed restaurants of this caliber many times, have you not?”

“Dining at sea is an entirely new experience, though. What a spectacular view!”

“True, it is quite lovely.”

A change of time and place could make otherwise unremarkable events into special occasions. I felt as though I was sitting inside a treasure chest. The sea was calm and we could hardly feel the rolling of the waves at all, so I let myself relax and settle into the comfortable feeling of this peaceful moment. Every morsel of food we were served was equally impressive, which only made the evening more exhilarating.

On that note, after we had savored our appetizers and potage, and the bread had been brought out, there was suddenly a commotion in the restaurant.

A guest entered and began loudly berating the waiter who had led him to his seat. “*This* seat? For *me*? Are you suggesting that I should be forced to eat in such a confined space!?”

Though the room was filled with chatter and the clinking of cutlery, this was a refined establishment, and all the guests were keeping the noise to a minimum. This made this gentleman’s vociferous complaining stand out all the more. All eyes were drawn to him at once.

I looked over as well. The offending seat was close to the center of the room.

“What is the meaning of this!?” he further demanded.

“Well, I, you see...” the waiter replied, struggling for words. “My apologies, sir. Please allow me to find you another available table.”

“Do any others *look* available? Clearly all the tables worth a damn are already occupied! Why didn’t you make sure one was ready before my arrival!?”

He did not care for the table he had been offered—that much was obvious. The tables and chairs were all identical, so it would have been equally cramped wherever he sat, but he spoke as though he had been presented with a uniquely terrible option. Everyone watching appeared shocked and appalled.

This scene felt awfully familiar. His voice, his dirty blond hair, and his lanky physique that contrasted with his imposing manner were all exactly as they had been earlier. I could only see him from behind, but I recognized him instantly. I had hoped he would be boarding the same ship so that I could observe him, but I hadn't expected to see him again so soon.

Nearby, I heard a disgruntled huff. "Him again?" said a member of the waitstaff, turning to a colleague with a bitter expression. Noticing my gaze, he hurriedly lowered his head and withdrew. This was not the sort of attitude to be displaying in front of the passengers. Still, for him to be fed up to the point of saying "again," I could only assume that quarrels along these lines had occurred before.

Not noticing the waiter's impropriety, Lord Simeon remained focused on the man who was making such a fuss. "Isn't that...?"

His expression left me very intrigued. "Do you know him?"

Lord Simeon looked back at me and rested his knife and fork on the plate. "Stay here. I'll be back in a moment."

He stood up without waiting for a reply and started to walk over. I was unsure as to what to do, but I ultimately followed after him. Knowing Lord Simeon, I was fairly sure he would be all right, but when the other gentleman was in such a foul mood, I couldn't help feeling ill at ease. Lord Simeon was usually level-headed, but in particular circumstances he could suddenly become quite aggravated. If an argument threatened to break out, I wanted to be there to hold him back.

He looked back for a moment and gave me a disapproving look, but he didn't tell me to go back. Instead, he quickly made his way to the table where the conflict was occurring.

"Lionel," he said.

The one who turned around first was not the man himself, but the woman accompanying him. She had been with him in the waiting room at the port. She was beautiful and around my age. From the way she dressed, she was probably unmarried. *Which means she isn't this gentleman's wife.*

She looked at Lord Simeon with some surprise. When she noticed me following him a moment later, her eyes turned cold. Though she had giggled with such casual scorn in the waiting room, this time her gaze seemed harsh and stinging. I decided it was better not to get too close and stopped when I was still a short distance away. I watched from a close enough position that I could still step in if necessary.

The man turned and took in Lord Simeon. He, too, was rather shocked. "You?" he seethed. I had several guesses about how he might have reacted—panic at being caught acting so rudely in front of someone he knew, awkward embarrassment, or foregoing all of that and simply being glad to see Lord Simeon—but all of these were incorrect. He simply took on an even more severe expression and glowered at Lord Simeon. "What are *you* doing here?"

Such naked hostility. That suggests they're not exactly friends. I couldn't see Lord Simeon's face, so I couldn't guess what he was thinking, but he responded with a calm voice. "I'm traveling to Enciel Island. I confess I had no idea you were on board. Are you on your way there as well?"

The man—Lionel, as he seemed to be called—did not answer Lord Simeon's question, but simply scoffed with annoyance.

Silence fell for the briefest of moments, and then Lord Simeon spoke again. "If you're about to have dinner, why not join us at our table? We haven't seen each for quite a while, so perhaps we could—"

"Hah!" said Lionel, spitting out a mocking exclamation without even letting him finish. "Eat dinner with you? Looking at that dull, tedious face of yours? Don't be ridiculous. Even the food would turn bland and flavorless."

My word! Who is this man? What on earth is his connection to Lord Simeon? From Lord Simeon's attitude I'd have guessed they were relatively close, but Lionel had responded with such intense loathing. What had transpired between the two of them?

Turning his back on the waiter, who had watched this exchange while trembling helplessly, Lionel began to stride off toward the exit. He walked past me, still glaring at Lord Simeon, before noticing me and stopping. “You’ve brought a woman with you? Heaven forbid. I only hope the ship doesn’t sink.”

“I’m sure you’re aware that I got married a few days ago,” Lord Simeon replied. “You didn’t attend the reception, but it was a pleasure to see your parents there.”

Wait—the whole family was invited? That must mean they’re rather close to House Flaubert. Could it be that this man is related to Lord Simeon?

I thought it best to give a curtsy. Even though he didn’t seem interested in politely introducing himself to me, that didn’t mean I had to respond with the same lack of decorum. It was essential to maintain the standards of a lady who had married into House Flaubert.

I heard a snort from above my lowered head. Lionel did not say anything further; he simply left in a storm of aggressive footsteps. It seemed he had forgotten that he’d collided with me in the port—or, more likely, that he didn’t realize I was the same person he’d seen before. It’s not as though I endeavored to be the sort of person who made enough of an impression to remember me after a moment like that.

Lord Simeon did nothing to stop him. He watched Lionel leave with a quiet sigh.

“Excuse me,” began the woman, addressing Lord Simeon now that she had been left on her own. “Are you an acquaintance of Lionel’s? I’m Alice Cernay. I don’t believe I’ve had the pleasure.”

Lord Simeon turned his attention toward her for the first time. Her face lit up, full of expectation. I had seen the same look on many a young lady’s face in high society. It was the sign of someone who wanted to be with him. *Does this mean she isn’t Lionel’s lover? But...they have different family names, and she’s never met Lord Simeon before. That also means they can’t be brother and sister, doesn’t it?*

“Simeon Flaubert,” he replied, remaining polite but curt. “He and I are related.”

“Lord Simeon, is it? Oh, and you must be from House Flaubert, is that right? Lionel mentioned that his family was related to an earldom. He must have meant House Flaubert.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Lord Simeon with a nod.

Alice’s eyes began to shine even more brightly. She drew closer to him. “Incredible! I never thought I’d stand face to face with a member of such a fine house. Are you from the main branch of the family, by any chance? I must apologize for Lionel’s behavior a moment ago. He’s in something of a bad mood today. All sorts of things have been going badly. If you like, I’d be happy to—”

“And who are you, exactly?” said Lord Simeon, forcibly cutting off Alice’s upbeat babble that struck the exact opposite tone compared to Lionel.

She momentarily fell silent, appearing rather daunted, but quickly recovered and answered his question. “Oh, how silly of me. After realizing that you were related to Lionel, I felt almost as though we already knew each other. Will you forgive me for my indiscretion?”

Looking at him with her head tilted to the side, she was very charming indeed. Her fashionable dress accentuated her body’s alluring curves, and her golden brown hair hung in large curls that made her look all the more glamorous—although it was probably not her original hair color. Despite her beauty, she did not have an unapproachable air about her. Her face was sweet and endearing, with large eyes that stood out. Her assertive manner of striking up a conversation gave her an affably sociable quality, and I imagined that most men would look upon her favorably. She also made good use of the impish technique of emphasizing her own cuteness even while apologizing for being rude.

However, that would have no effect on Lord Simeon. He had a little devil of a brother who was even more fiendish and adorable, so he was well used to such a strategy.

“So, what is your connection to Lionel, then?” He spoke with a voice that could almost be described as frigid. Rather than being taken with her charm, he seemed to be feeling displeasure at her overfamiliarity.

This, at last, made Alice lose some of her vigor. “I’m a friend,” she said at last.

“A friend.”

“Yes, that’s correct. He invited me to spend time with his family on Enciel Island. It’s a marvelous place. Such wonderful views—and what delicious cuisine! If you’re visiting Enciel Island as well, you must also be staying at the lord’s manor, yes? Perhaps we could all go sightseeing together! It would be such a lot of—”

“You’ll have to discuss that with Lionel. He seems to prefer that our parties remain separate. In any case, we’re in the middle of dinner, so please excuse us.”

After cutting her off mid-sentence once again, he left, putting an arm around me and bringing me along with him.

As we returned to our table, I looked back just briefly and met Alice’s eyes. Her gaze toward me was severe, as though it was coming from a different person altogether than had just been trying to curry favor with Lord Simeon.

The way she looked at me felt oddly typical. I’d even say it gave me a sense of nostalgia. When Lord Simeon and I first announced our engagement, I was met with stares like that, and worse, from almost every young lady I encountered, but it had been some time since I’d been subjected to such animosity.

After all, if those young ladies had continued to attack me, they would have found themselves making an enemy of House Flaubert. They had originally expected the engagement would soon be canceled, but it had in fact continued and resulted in our marriage. As a result, they had all done an about face and made efforts to draw nearer instead. That was the nature of high society. It was a world where people hid their ill feelings beneath polite smiles, and where behaving like a mature adult meant moving effectively in different circles and forging beneficial connections.

Alice’s treatment of me reminded me of those initial reactions, which gave me a rush of emotion. *Ah yes, I remember. That’s how it felt.*

The waiter asked if she still wished to dine, but she left in a huff without even replying. We returned to our seats and continued eating. The other guests returned to their own meals and conversations as well, and the restaurant regained its refined and peaceful atmosphere.

Having estimated when we would return to our table, our waiter quickly brought out the fish. Between delectable mouthfuls, I asked in a muted voice, “So, how exactly are you and Lionel related?” Lord Simeon had so many relatives that this information alone did not tell me much.

“His full name is Lionel Duchesnay,” Lord Simeon replied as he started on his fish. “He’s the eldest son of the man in charge of the Duchesnay Shipping Company, and the grandson of my grandfather’s cousin. I see his parents from time to time since they live in Sans-Terre, but it’s been several years since I last saw Lionel.”

“Ah, so he’s from House Duchesnay. That would explain his attitude toward the staff.”

I had many associations with his family’s name. Mr. Duchesnay owned the company that ran this ship. They did not have a noble rank, but were highly successful in the marine transport business and were known for being rather wealthy. If Lionel was Mr. Duchesnay’s son, the staff at the port and the crew on board the ship were essentially his own employees. *He must see it as a matter of course for his wishes to be accommodated, which would then lead to that sort of brazenly high-handed behavior when they’re not. Even so, it’s not exactly classy.*

“I remember his parents,” I replied. “I greeted them at the reception, and I’ve seen them in society on many occasions. This is the first time I’ve ever met Lionel, however. If he’s the heir to House Duchesnay I’d expect him to appear in society quite frequently, but I have no recollection of him at all.”

It was actually rather frustrating to encounter someone I had gathered no information about. Perhaps I’d simply been unfortunate enough to never be in the same place as him at the same time, but it seemed impossible—it had been nearly four years since my debut, and I had attended every function I could!

In response to my pouting, Lord Simeon smiled gently. “That’s not especially surprising. He was studying abroad for quite some time. He’s wandered all over the place—to Linden, Vissel, and elsewhere. He did return to Lagrange last year, but that was because his younger brother had passed away, so he went into mourning and didn’t appear in society.”

“Oh, now that you mention it...” I reached for the information stored in the deep recesses of my mind. Lord Simeon’s words allowed me to connect some otherwise disparate facts. “That was last summer, wasn’t it? I heard the second son died in an accident.”

“Indeed,” said Lord Simeon, nodding. “There were no witnesses, so it’s still unclear if it was an accident or a murder, but no motive was discovered, so his death was treated as accidental. A murder would affect the family’s reputation, you see.”

“Goodness.”

“From what I know, I had the impression that the brothers were rather fond of one another. Lionel has always been a tad selfish and arrogant, but I never saw him as having quite such a vile streak. Perhaps he’s still beset by grief and lashing out because of it.”

“Oh...”

Hearing this made me feel slightly sorry for the man. He shouldn’t have been venting his anger at employees who had nothing to do with his brother’s death, of course. That was no way to behave. Still, seeing him now as someone harboring such anguish, any remaining negativity I felt toward him vanished.

I decided to mention my other theory. “He showed you such blatant antipathy that I thought it might be related to some rivalry he feels, since you’re the heir to the main family.”

“Well,” said Lord Simeon with a wry smile, “I can’t say there isn’t some element of that as well.”

“Ah, I suspected as much.”

“The rest of society bears some blame for that, as my family is often brought up as an example to provoke them. Lionel is only one year older than Adrien, so he was often compared with us, given our similar age range.”

There were three years between the eldest two Flaubert brothers, which meant that Lionel was twenty-five. I could see how the gossip and barbed comments of adults must have stung when they were youngsters. There would no doubt have been a mixture of envy toward House Duchesnay, which had

become highly successful in spite of it all, and flattery directed at House Flaubert. Through an adult's eyes, the motivations are immediately transparent, but children would simply hear the words and take them to heart.

It couldn't have helped that Lord Simeon was not an easy person to make friends with. He was not the type of man to easily open his heart, so if the other person put themselves on guard, it was likely that the distance would only increase over time. It wasn't as though they were siblings forced to see each other day in, day out whether they wanted to or not. If they didn't go out of their way to meet, it was possible to go for years without doing so. It was hardly surprising that they were still so distant from one another.

This was a commonplace story, but it still seemed a shame.

Since we both were headed for the same destination, perhaps the reserve would be thrown off over the course of the trip. If he knew that Lord Simeon was really just an awkward and overly serious person, perhaps Lionel would change his perspective.

We relaxed and enjoyed the rest of our meal without any further incident of note. A Lagrangian-style formal dinner can end with a wait of an hour or more for the petit fours to be served, so by the time we had finished and left the restaurant, it was pitch dark outside the window and I could no longer tell the sea from the sky.

"Would you mind if we went outside for a while?" I asked Lord Simeon. It felt like a waste to go straight back to the cabin.

"To the observation deck?" he replied.

"No, I'd like to go to the main deck. I have to see how it looks at night."

"There won't be anything to see, you know."

But this was my first ever sea voyage, and I had to gather as much material as I possibly could. With Lord Simeon in tow, I made my way to the main deck. Even the passageway leading to it, which had been brimming with people earlier in the day, was remarkably quiet at this hour. We didn't encounter any other passengers, or even any crew members.

When we opened the door and went outside, we were greeted by an even

colder breeze than earlier in the evening. Darkness spread out before my eyes, silent and empty. I could just barely see by the light that trickled out from inside the ship, but it was clear that no one else was present apart from us. “It’s so deserted,” I said, walking across the deck with an effort to keep my footsteps muted. Though during the day I had been rather warm in long sleeves, the nighttime wind now chilled my bare shoulders. When I wrapped my arms around myself, Lord Simeon took off his jacket and draped it over me.

“There’s no view to enjoy at this time of night,” said Lord Simeon. “It’s nothing but dark and dangerous.”

“But the stars are so beautiful. Don’t you think it would be a shame not to see them?”

The sea was pitch black and presented nothing to look at, and the deck, too, was desolate and lacking in any worthwhile sights. If I craned my neck, however, the sky was packed full of twinkling stars. *This is what a starry sky is meant to be.* Even with my poor eyesight it looked so magnificent, and I could only imagine it would be more so for someone with good vision. There were none of the man-made lights or tall buildings that made the stars harder to see on land. This was a luxury that one could only indulge in while at sea, far from civilization.

“Isn’t it amazing?” I added.

“Marielle, it’s not safe to keep looking upwards like that. When it’s dark out you need to pay extra attention to your surroundings. Don’t wander along without looking where you’re going.”

Rather than gazing at the starry sky, Lord Simeon seemed more preoccupied with leading me. Admittedly, it was somewhat dangerous to be walking aimlessly like this. I returned my gaze to the deck, wondering if there might be somewhere we could sit comfortably.

As I glanced around, a small light flashed across my field of vision. *Is someone moving about at the stern of the ship?* The light flickered. As I stared, wondering what it was, another light shone further off, blinking on and off above the inky sea. “What could that be?”

Lord Simeon, who appeared to be focused entirely on ensuring I didn’t trip,

had not noticed the lights. When he finally turned to look where I was pointing, they had disappeared entirely. “What do you mean?”

“They’re gone now, but I saw some lights over there just now. There was one on the ship, flickering like a firefly, and then I saw one just like it out on the sea.”

“Surely it was just a lighthouse? We’re still in coastal waters, so it’s entirely possible that land would be visible from here.”

“If so, I wish I could see it again to make sure.” Even straining my eyes, I could not see any hint of the light anymore. It had vanished into the darkness, like a fairy showing itself only for a brief moment. “Hmm...” *How intriguing.* I took a step, intending to go towards the stern, where the first light had been.

But Lord Simeon took hold of my arm to stop me. “Marielle...”

“One of the lights was definitely on board the ship. That means there must be someone over there. Aren’t you curious about what they’re doing? I’d like to go and take a peek, that’s all.”

“I’m sure it’s just a crew member doing their job. You needn’t go out of your way to look at that.”

“But what about the light over the sea? I’m absolutely certain it wasn’t a lighthouse.”

“Perhaps you mistook the stars for something else. Or perhaps it could be a sea creature—there are some that glow in the dark, you know. It’s too dangerous to go wandering.”

He kept his grip of me, stubbornly refusing to let me move another inch, but I was too intrigued to give up. “Honestly, it won’t take long!”

“Ma...ri...elle...” he said, marking out each syllable.

Hmm? Something’s changed about the tone of his voice. I regained the awareness of the world around me that the flickering lights had momentarily taken away, and at that moment I realized that his body heat had come closer to me.

“Lord Simeon?”

When I turned around, the look I saw on his face was not one of annoyance. He put his hands on my shoulders and bent down over me. His lips drew close to my ear and I felt his breath as he whispered, “You appear to have quite forgotten, but we are newlyweds.”

“Oh, well,” I stammered. “Of course we are, but...”

His low voice and warm breath sent my heart into a sudden frenzy. When I reflexively took a step to try to escape, he pressed forward even more, forcing me against a wall.

“H-hold on a moment, Lord Simeon...”

To prevent him from kissing me against the wall, I held out both my hands to keep him at bay. He pushed me back further and slid the jacket off my shoulders. This exposed the nape of my neck, and his breath now tickled against it. The instant that I felt that, the gentle pressure of his passion struck not only my heart, but my entire body.

“W-wait... I... I... My word... Lord Simeon!”

“When one thinks of newlyweds at night, there are all sorts of things one imagines them doing, and yet my wife neglects me to go searching for reference material. How tragic.”

The words caught in my throat. His unashamedly frank statement made not only my ears feel hot, but my whole head. *What in the world has happened!? This isn't the Lord Simeon I know!*

But I knew that wasn't exactly true. *Yes, I've seen this version of him on quite a few occasions. I know full well that even a noble and virtuous knight can show a different side of himself after dark. But...even so!*

“T-This isn't any way to be behaving in a public place like this. Aren't you afraid that someone might see?”

“Who could possibly see us? It's completely deserted.”

“Someone might still be watching!”

It wasn't that I didn't enjoy seeing his face like this, or hearing his seductive voice. I loved it, in fact. Being set upon by such a malicious smile was incredible

—he was every bit the brutal black-hearted military officer! *Heavens above, I must definitely write a scene like this! There's no way around it—it's prime material! Vice Captain, you're the best. Please allow me to worship you!*

Despite all those thoughts, I could not stay calm and accept the situation. If he didn't move away, even just slightly, my heart was going to give out.

As I verged on fainting, he let out a beguiling chuckle. “Indeed, you're quite right. Let's return to the cabin. We can continue this there.”

Words failed me again. *Continue this...in the cabin? In other words, he means...*

“Would you prefer not to? And after you pleaded so much before the wedding. It was what you were wishing for all that time. Isn't that right?”

“Yes,” I said at last.

“Now that your wish has finally been granted, do you mean to refuse it?”

“No...”

I screamed internally. I wished I could go back and punch myself from before the wedding! I was unbelievably embarrassed now as I thought back on how unreservedly I had begged him. Can a person die of shame? What immodest things I had said!

How was I to have known? No story ever depicts those things in frank detail! To me it had seemed more than amorous enough for a couple to simply embrace each other in bed and sleep alongside one another. I had no idea there was a level beyond that! No one ever told me!

This situation was too much for me. There was practically smoke coming out of my ears. I genuinely started to feel dizzy. I'd done my utmost to divert my attention from it because remembering made me feel like I would die, but here I was with no choice but to think about it. *Forcibly reminding me is certainly brutal! Thank you, Lord Simeon!*

“Well, Marielle? Shall we go back?”

“Yes,” I said, my voice wavering. It was better not to resist the Demon Vice Captain's onslaught. I gave a small nod. It's not that I didn't want to, after all.

It's just that it was difficult for me to deal with in both my head and my heart.

"Good girl," he replied, a hint of laughter in his voice. That was the *coup de grâce*. He put his jacket back over my shoulders and led me back inside the ship. I kept stumbling, so he held me tight, practically carrying me there.

In the end, he coaxed me into a very pleasant state indeed, and I didn't realize until the next morning that I had entirely forgotten about the mysterious light.

How vexing! But, oh, how I love him.

Chapter Four

On the second day of our voyage, the weather was so fine that going out onto the deck required a parasol. Unlike at night, it was crowded with fellow passengers. I casually strolled about, parasol in hand, just as many other ladies did. Children passed by in clothes that suggested they were from poorer backgrounds. This was a rarely witnessed sight—that of people from different social classes gathered together in the same place.

Lord Simeon followed behind me, strolling just as casually. We had left Joanna and Daniel to watch the cabin. *Lord Simeon could have simply stayed there and rested as well, but I suppose a military officer like him isn't likely to be worn out by trying to keep up with me. I may beat him in terms of youthful vigor, but in terms of raw stamina he reigns supreme. I needn't worry about him.*

Thinking about the previous night still made my face burn, but I tried to put it out of my mind. I wondered if I would get used to it at some point and be completely fine with it. At the moment, that seemed unthinkable.

For now, Lord Simeon was accompanying me in silence and making no efforts to prevent me from doing whatever I wanted, so I wandered all over the place as my whims dictated. Suddenly, I noticed a man walking towards us. "Oh!"

It was Lionel, recognizable as always from his fine clothes, dirty blond hair, and lanky physique. Alice was walking beside him, her arm in his. She nestled so close to him that they were practically embracing. *Honestly, it's inconceivable that they're merely friends. It's clear at a glance that they're lovers.*

Lionel seemed accepting of this close contact, but even so, his face lacked any suggestion that he was enjoying a fun voyage with his lover, or that he felt any great delight at being enticed by a beautiful lady. He did not look as disgruntled as he had been yesterday, but he definitely did not look like he was having fun. *Perhaps he really is still suffering after what happened to his brother. Maybe Alice is doing her very best to try and cheer him up.*

The pair rapidly drew nearer. They seemed not to have noticed me yet, as

they did not even glance in my direction. Alice was repeatedly attempting to start a conversation with Lionel, while Lionel replied with nothing but vague one-and two-word utterances. They didn't see me as anything other than a part of the scenery around them. They had probably forgotten what I even looked like.

After walking straight past me, they then noticed Lord Simeon. Both of them turned to face him at the same moment and contrasting expressions appeared on their faces: Alice flashed a beaming smile, while Lionel stared daggers.

"Oh my, if isn't Lord Simeon," said Alice. "Hello there!"

"Good day," Lord Simeon replied.

Only those two were involved in this interaction. I curtsied but was ignored. Lionel, meanwhile, huffed and walked away as though he intended a deliberate slight.

"Honestly, Lionel!"

Alice stood there and appeared conflicted, apparently torn between chasing after him or talking to Lord Simeon. At first she appeared to be leaning towards the latter option, but the moment her eyes met mine, her expression hardened. She scrutinized me from top to bottom, then huffed and turned away exactly as Lionel had. With a brief goodbye to Lord Simeon, she left to follow Lionel.

Her undisguised displeasure was quite amusing to me. "She certainly wears her heart on her sleeve."

"What does it say about Lionel's taste that he's wandering about with such a tawdry woman?"

Lord Simeon seemed more offended than I was. I laughed and took his arm, snuggling up to him as Alice had to Lionel. "I think it's ordinary enough. Noblewomen behave in that manner as well."

If one thing was clear, it was that Alice was not a noblewoman. From her use of language and the way she carried herself, I had been able to tell straight away that she was a commoner. Her clothing was stylish, but not to a degree that it would pass as upper-class. Perhaps that was why I irritated her so much. She couldn't hope to compete against a lady whose social rank was so much

closer to Lord Simeon's, but it must have been extremely vexing for her to lose out to someone so inferior to her in terms of looks and allure.

"It's a fierce and underhanded battle between two women, overflowing with vicious emotions! What a great experience it will be!"

Lord Simeon looked exasperated. "How can it be underhanded or vicious when one of the parties involved is viewing it in such a manner?"

What in the world is wrong with viewing it that way? Surely it's better to enjoy our interactions than be upset by them!

As we walked arm in arm, Lord Simeon took my parasol and held it up for me. I knew he had done this due to the height difference between us, but I wondered if he had noticed that it was the gesture of a seductive ladies' man. If I pointed this out he'd no doubt have become flustered and turned bright red, so I decided to privately enjoy it on my own.

Thus we were enjoying our time together in a suitable fashion for newlyweds—but all of a sudden, we were shocked by a loud noise. This long, low sound was the ship's horn. It had been used as a signal when the ship had departed, but I wasn't sure why it would need to be sounded at sea. Everyone around looked just as shocked.

The horn blared out several times, shaking my eardrums and reverberating through my stomach. I looked around, wondering if there was some sort of emergency.

"What's that?" I said.

In the distance, a ship was visible on the sea, positioned exactly in the direction we were traveling. The distance between us and them was rapidly closing. *Perhaps they use the horn as a warning sound when they come too close to another ship. Then both ships can steer out of the way to safely pass each other.*

If so, however, the other ship did not appear to be responding. It was directly facing us, steadfastly maintaining its course. However, we did not appear to be steering out of the way either. If the situation proceeded like this, we would crash.

Even with my poor eyesight, the other ship was so close now that I could see it clearly. It was not a paddle steamer like the *Decoration*, but a sailing ship of a much smaller size.

With some trepidation, I looked in the direction of the wheelhouse. “Why aren’t we trying to avoid them? Isn’t it dangerous?”

“We are,” uttered Lord Simeon quietly. “The other vessel is changing its course to match.”

“What?”

“They’re deliberately maintaining the same position relative to us. Are they trying to ram us?”

“*What?*”

Shocked, I looked forward again. The passengers who had been closer to the bow of the ship were now running back our way in a panic.

“Marielle, this way,” said Lord Simeon, embracing me and pulling me aside. To avoid being caught up in the flow of people, I drew my body as close to his as possible.

I stared at the fast-approaching ship. “If they crash into us, will we sink? We have to go and fetch Joanna and Daniel! If they’re inside, they won’t be able to escape!”

“Calm down. I can’t imagine that ship truly means to crash into us. They’d suffer far worse damage than we would. I imagine their aim is to pull up alongside us.”

“Alongside us?”

“Yes, so that they can come aboard.”

I felt a measure of relief, but that was short-lived. *Wait, why do they want to board our ship? It sounds familiar—like something I’ve read about in books before.*

“Don’t tell me they’re...”

Still holding me tight, Lord Simeon glared at the oncoming ship with a stern

face. “I’d like to think it’s one of the small high-speed ships used by the coast guard, but the model appears to be different.”

The horn continued to resound as if it had lost its mind. I could see a crowd of men assembled at the side of the other ship. They appeared to be readying themselves.

“But...won’t their ship go straight past ours? Is this how a pirate raid normally works?”

I didn’t know much about them, but I was sure I recalled reading stories about pirates boarding other ships by crossing a wooden plank. If they were approaching from the front like this, rather than behind, wouldn’t they pass by too quickly and be unable to do that?

“Our speed has dropped considerably as a precaution against collision. I suspect they’ll be able to make it over even if we don’t stop completely.”

“My word!”

It was hard to imagine that they could carry out such a circus-like feat until it occurred before my very eyes. Before our crew could increase the speed again, the pirate ship slid alongside us. Their steering was masterfully precise, keeping them at the closest possible distance without touching us. At the exact right moment, several grappling hooks were thrown across. Our ship was taller, so I couldn’t see much below the hooks that had latched onto the side, but I knew what was happening.

Lord Simeon kept his arms around me and moved even further away from the threat. The deck was in chaos, with some people running into the ship to escape, others panicking where they stood, and still others running outside from within the ship.

Before I knew it, the men climbing the ropes showed themselves. Now they, too, stood amongst the pandemonium.

High-pitched explosive sounds cut through the air. Just like the pirates I had read about, these men carried muskets. All at once, each of them had fired a warning shot into the air. The passengers running about all stopped and cowered on the floor, cradling their heads. I crouched down as well, enveloped

by Lord Simeon.

One of the men bellowed, “Stay where you are, all of you! Don’t move a muscle unless you want a bullet in you!”

At first glance, it was clear he was very muscular and tanned. His head was completely bald, but he had a large dark beard that covered half of his face. This quintessential pirate appeared to be their leader.

The barrels of their guns, which had been pointed toward the sky, were now aimed at the people on the deck.

“Lord Simeon,” I began—but he shushed me and put a hand over my mouth. He was watching the pirates carefully, not letting his guard down for a second, but it did not seem as though he was about to take any action.

The man who had barked out the threat looked at a nearby crew member and said, “Stop the ship! Right now! If you don’t, we’ll start shooting your passengers to death, one at a time.”

The crewman practically tripped over his feet in his rush to get to the wheelhouse. This was not a situation where he could challenge their demands. We and all of the passengers around us were hostages—and unlike a sword, a gun can kill even at a distance. Even if you tried to run away, you would simply be shot in the back.

Ordinarily, no one had guns except for the military, and even they didn’t use them on an everyday basis. They were a weapon reserved exclusively for war. The passengers trembled violently, rooted to the spot, as they stared down the barrels of these unfamiliar tools of death.

I surreptitiously looked up at Lord Simeon’s face. He was still keeping careful watch of the pirates’ actions, but I saw no sign that he intended to step in. It seemed he agreed that there was nothing to be done but follow their orders.

For a moment I wondered if Lord Simeon was biding his time—looking for an opening to strike somehow. *What if he subdued one of them, such as the bearded man who appears to be their leader? Then we’d have a hostage of our own. I’m sure he could manage it.*

I quickly abandoned this notion, however. Doing that would not turn the

tables in our favor. The other side would still have more hostages, and could kill any of them at any time. There was nothing we could do to make it a more even match.

The *Decoration* was merely a cargo and passenger ship—none of the crew were combatants. An escort vessel might have been able to oppose the pirates, but there weren't enough battleships in existence to accompany every single voyage, and even if there were, it wouldn't be practical. I'd read in the newspaper, too, that if a ship was raided, there was nothing to be done about it.

For now, we had no choice but to meekly obey and avoid provoking them. The best we could hope for was to minimize the damage as much as possible and do our best to ensure that no lives were lost.

At last the *Decoration* came to a full stop. The smaller ship nimbly turned around and pulled up beside us again. From here I could see the masts and sails. The latter were perfectly ordinary white sails, and there was no sign of the skull-and-crossbones flag described so often in stories. If not for the present circumstances, one would probably never guess it was a pirate ship. *I've learned something new. Real pirates pretend to be normal ships and cunningly draw near before suddenly baring their teeth.*

The pirates made the scattered passengers gather in one place. We were moved along with everyone else. This seemed to be purely to make it easier to watch everyone. Other than intimidating us, they did not actually do anything. One often hears of pirates kidnapping people and demanding a ransom, but the pirates before us did not seem interested in laying a hand on any of the passengers.

A group of them went inside the ship. They soon returned, holding the captain, helmsman, and other important crew members at gunpoint.

My mind raced as I wondered what they had in mind beyond mere threatening behavior. For a while now, there had been noises coming from below. I could hear voices. The pirates who had remained on their own ship were doing something, but because I was unable to go and look, my anxiety steadily grew more intense.

I reflexively looked at Lord Simeon, who quietly whispered in my ear, “They’re probably unloading the cargo.”

So it isn’t people they’re after, but cargo? That’s a silver lining, perhaps. As long as we continue to comply, maybe we can hope that no one will be hurt.

Time seemed to stand still. Tension filled the air for what felt like an eternity. In reality, though, it couldn’t have been much longer than thirty minutes before the horn sounded again like a signal from below. The pirates immediately began to withdraw, carefully keeping their guns trained on the hostages. They did not leave themselves vulnerable even for a moment as they disappeared off the edge of the ship, one by one.

Once the very last pirate—the bearded man—had disappeared, Lord Simeon leapt out. He ran over to the side of the ship, keeping his body low in case any shots were fired. Then he slowly got up and poked his head above the handrail.

When he finally relinquished his guarded posture and stood up normally, I knew the danger had passed. The crew began to move and looked out over the handrail as well.

From where I sat, I could see that the pirate ship had departed. The masts and sails, which had been right next to us, were moving away. The pirates adeptly used the wind to their advantage, quickly picking up speed, and in a flash the ship had sailed far off into the distance.

I stood up and ran over to Lord Simeon. “Can’t we chase after them?” I knew it wouldn’t achieve anything even if we did, but I asked anyway. Unlike when the pirate ship had appeared, both ships were now traveling in the same direction. It seemed an odd choice to make if they were trying to get away.

Lord Simeon shook his head. “There’s too great a difference in speed. This ship’s main advantage is the large amount it can transport. It sacrifices speed to achieve that. Their ship, on the other hand, has a hull that’s even more lithe than a standard sailing ship, which allows it to move at a very high velocity. The wind is behind them as well. We would never be able to catch up.”

Though steam ships had revolutionized the world of marine transport almost overnight, it seemed they did not surpass other ships in every respect. Now that the pirates had successfully stolen the cargo, the *Decoration*’s crew could do

nothing but watch them escape.

Considering that their ship was not even half the size of ours, they had executed their plan magnificently. My ability to feel admiration for them at this stage was due to the fact that no one had suffered any real harm. Despite this terrifying experience, the passengers and crew were all safe, with not a single death or injury. That let me put a hand on my chest and heave a sigh of relief.

The captain and his men were not able to rest, however. They were busy running about to confirm that no one was injured and try to bring the commotion under control.

After waiting a short while for the activity to calm down, we went back inside the ship. In the process I noticed that we had dropped the parasol somewhere, but if we went to look for it now we'd only have gotten in the crew's way. We were forced to simply give up on it and head straight back to the cabin.

"This voyage has become rather more complicated than I expected," I remarked to Lord Simeon along the way. "I'm glad no one was hurt. Are pirate attacks common on this route? I had no idea."

Referring to them as "pirates" did have something of an antiquated air about it. They were essentially a band of thieves, and robbery was something common to every era. I knew that the ships traveling between Lagrange and the southern countries frequently met with these sorts of raids, but I'd understood the northern seas to be safer.

"They're not especially common, but not unheard of either. Even safe countries with good public order are not entirely free of crime, and this is much the same."

"It's simply a case of bad luck, in other words?" I paused a moment. "If I say that for the purposes of information gathering it's actually *good* luck, will you be angry with me?"

"If you know how I'll react, you needn't bother saying it."

"Fair enough." I shrugged my shoulders at his rebuke.

I had enough self-awareness to know how tactless that view was, but my author's instincts were aggressively demanding that I make proper use of this

experience. *Everything I see and hear is nourishment for my creative works. Hopefully you won't mind me treating it that way in secret!*

Even though I humbly agreed on the surface, Lord Simeon sighed wearily nonetheless, as though he could see right through me. Still, being grateful to have a husband magnanimous enough to avoid pressing the matter any further, I held my tongue for now and continued walking. We were reunited with Joanna and Daniel along the way—they were worried and had left the cabin in search of us—and together we were all able to relax at last.

Although the people on board were safe, we had still suffered an attack, so the ship was to make an unplanned stop at the nearest port. Later that same day we arrived at a small town called Marable. Typically only postal vessels and local ships docked at Marable's port, but there was apparently a coast guard outpost as well, so the passengers were informed that we would be stopping for two nights to report the incident and allow for an investigation.

Many were upset about the delay, of course, but there was no way around it—we simply had to wait patiently.

We were allowed to either stay on board the ship or disembark and visit the town. For me, there was no doubt in my mind as to which was the right choice. "Whether it was bad luck or otherwise, sitting here and complaining won't solve anything. Let's enjoy this detour while we have the chance!"

Naturally, the prospect of visiting a faraway town that I knew nothing about filled me with excitement. After I made my thoughts known to Lord Simeon, we left the ship. I didn't see any other passengers disembarking, however. It seemed that virtually everyone had decided to stay on board. *It seems like a waste of an opportunity. Why seclude yourselves on a ship stuck in port when you could be enjoying the outside world?*

I looked back at the ship and saw an open door leading to the cargo hold. It looked to be just the right height for the pirate ship to unload the cargo without much difficulty. Just because that ship was small did not mean it wasn't perfectly suited to its task, even if that task was plunder.

Some people in military uniforms came over to talk to the crew. *They must be*

members of the coast guard. The coast guard belonged to the navy, so they wore the same blue uniforms.

“Hmm?” As my eyes wandered, they met the gaze of someone standing close to the ship. He seemed to be a member of the crew, but he wasn’t wearing a uniform. From the looks of things, he had no involvement with the cabins or navigation, but was instead responsible for the cargo hold.

I had the feeling I’d seen him somewhere before. He stared back in our direction. Glared, even. He wasn’t looking at me, however, but at Lord Simeon.

“Does that crewman have some connection to you?”

Lord Simeon glanced over in response to my question, and the man abruptly looked away. Lord Simeon shook his head. “I’m quite sure I don’t know him.”

“Oh, really? It certainly looked as though he had a strong opinion of you.”

I watched as the man walked off to talk to a colleague. He was still rather young—probably still a teenager—with childlike features. Being a manual laborer, his body was toned and firm, and he appeared to be quite agile. He had unusually vibrant red hair, and— *Wait! Now I remember! I saw that same red hair before we set off from the port in Sans-Terre! It has to be the same person.*

What reason would he have to feel aggrieved, though? We hadn’t had any disagreements with the crew during the journey so far, or even stood out especially. I could imagine being distracted by Lord Simeon, who was, after all, an unusually dashing gentleman, but why scowl at him like that? Had a girl he fancied fallen in love with Lord Simeon or some such?

I didn’t understand, but he hadn’t said anything to us, so I decided not to worry about it. More important was our search for a place to stay.

We flagged down someone at the port and asked if there was a hotel anywhere nearby. This older man, who seemed just the sort of person I’d expect to encounter in a port town, replied that he knew someone who ran an inn. “But it’s not a fine hotel by any stretch of the imagination. I doubt it’s a place that nobles like yourselves would want to spend the night.”

The inn he mentioned was within walking distance of the port. It was certainly too small to be called a hotel. It was more of a guesthouse, with no staff other

than the family that ran it.

We were greeted by the proprietress, who was rather surprised. “Well, yes, we do have rooms available, but I warn you, they’re quite cramped. You can eat here as well, but I don’t know if it’ll be up to your standards.”

She gestured over to the small restaurant, which looked as though it was probably frequented by the local townspeople as well. It was constructed in a way that felt truly rustic, with a view straight through to the kitchen.

Lord Simeon looked at me, then turned back to the proprietress without a word and requested two rooms.

Daniel, who had carried our luggage here, returned to the ship to watch the cabin, as it was apparently better to leave one person there in case anything happened. Joanna was to stay with us to attend to our needs. I wondered how we would divide up the rooms, but Joanna strongly insisted that she stay in a single room by herself.

When we reached our room, I went over to the window. “What a charming little window!” I said, opening it and poking my head out. “And the view—it’s like peering into a toybox! What a delightful town!”

The roof of a neighboring house was right in front of me, and I could look down upon the narrow alley in between. The town was built on hilly terrain, so the inn was at a higher level than the port. There were no modern buildings or wide roads filled with carriages as in Sans-Terre; the narrow streets twisted and turned, with small houses crowded together on each side. The chaotic scene truly was akin to a disorganized collection of toys.

Beyond the brick walls and red tiled roofs, I had a view of the sea so stunning it reminded me of an illustration in a children’s book.

“Goodness, I have such an intense urge to write all of a sudden. This is the sort of spectacle that stories are made of!”

Joanna walked over. “My lady, please restrain yourself. If you’re too enthusiastic, you might fall out of the window. Is it really such an interesting view? To me it looks like an ordinary country town with nothing special about it.”

“I don’t think it’s ordinary. For me, it’s a rare experience.”

“Ah, well, I suppose that’s true.”

All the sights I was taking in were new and exciting to me. I longed to take a walk around the town. The sun had descended quite some way into the west and it would not be long until sunset, but honestly, a twilight stroll sounded like great fun as well. When I looked over at Lord Simeon to gauge his mood, however, he firmly shook his head.

I didn’t even say anything!

“I can understand how you feel, but this is still unknown territory for us. We shouldn’t be wandering around at night when we don’t yet know where anything is. You’ll have to wait until tomorrow before going for a walk.”

“Yes, all right.”

He knew what I was going to say before I even said it. Was I that much of an open book? Still, he had raised a valid point, so I held my eagerness at bay and sat down in a chair to rest. After all, regardless of all else, I was married now. I was a grown-up lady. Instead of frolicking about, I had to exercise self-restraint and conduct myself with self-possessed refinement.

“What a wonderful array of fresh fish and seafood! The shellfish are gigantic! I couldn’t hope for more from a port town!”

The dinner we enjoyed downstairs may have been somewhat lacking in variety, but there was plenty of each item, and they piled on the freshly caught seafood with generous serving sizes. The huge bowl of dense stew placed before me appeared to be a portion for one, as another bowl just like it was presented to Lord Simeon. Though this alone could have filled me to bursting, we were served mutton pie as well, and bread of course, and even salad. In fact, we were served so much of the cheese-laden salad that it seemed excessive even shared between us. I almost wanted to ask if they thought we were rabbits.

“It’s all so aromatic. They must have used a lot of herbs.”

Lord Simeon nodded. “The warm climate in these parts is perfectly suited to

cultivating herbs. Enciel Island's cuisine is much the same. They use a very pronounced quantity of herbs."

A group of townspeople were eating at another table. I had the impression they were regular customers. They looked at us as though we were strange creatures of some sort. *You needn't treat us as if we're so exotic. Admittedly we do stand out a little, but all we're doing is eating dinner.*

I was sure it was because Lord Simeon was there. If I was on my own, I wouldn't have stood out this much. I wouldn't even be noticed. What a despicable husband, drawing all eyes toward him wherever he went.

Two of the locals began to talk about us.

"Who are those fancy-looking folk, anyway? How did a pair of high-class nobles end up eating in this place?"

"Passengers from that ship in port, I hear. The ship's stuck there for a bit, so they came to stay in the town."

"Why bother? I bet that beast of a ship has bigger rooms and better food than this place."

"It takes all sorts, you know. People can have weird tastes, however rich they are."

Gossiping about us is all well and good, but do you have to do it when we're right here within earshot? Besides, what's so wrong with enjoying our trip to the fullest?

Still, since we were in the same place, eating the same delicious food, it was only natural that we developed more of an affinity for one another. Before we knew it, we had made friends with them, and we all gathered around a single table and drank a toast.

"Aren't you going to drink, mister?" said one of them. "There's not much special about our town, so we're quite proud of the liquor we make here. You have to taste it!"

"I'm afraid I never drink any alcohol," Lord Simeon replied.

I turned to him, glass in hand. "But it's so delicious! What a loss it would be

never to drink this!”

“You know full well that I— Hold on, Marielle! Did you drink all of that in one gulp!?”

“Oh, I suppose I did. It simply tasted too good. And my throat was dry.”

“I like the way you drink, little miss!” said another of the townspeople. “Let’s keep going! Another round!”

“Please stop this!” insisted Lord Simeon.

“Yes, indeed! I’m not a ‘little miss,’ I’m a married woman!”

“That is *not* what I meant!”

The second night of our trip turned out to be a delightful one spent in the friendly company of the cheerful locals. By the time I went to sleep, I was satisfied to have enjoyed an experience far removed from my daily life, and I couldn’t wait for tomorrow. It was only a shame that my bed was a little narrow and hard.



Chapter Five

The next morning came at last. After we enjoyed a rustic breakfast at the restaurant on the first floor, I got dressed as quickly as I could manage, eager to set off right away. For ease of movement, I put on a dress with a relatively short skirt and wore high-laced boots with low heels. Since I had lost my parasol, I wore a hat instead to keep the sun from my face.

However, the very moment we were ready to depart, we received an unexpected visitor.

“Terribly sorry to be bothering you so early. I’d like to ask a question or two regarding yesterday’s pirate incident.”

The man who had appeared was dressed in a coast guard uniform. He was short and stout, with a round, red face. He most definitely had the air of a country soldier about him. Though he was trying his hardest to exude a sense of authority, it made no impact on me whatsoever. *Perhaps I’m simply too used to the Demon Vice Captain.*

He introduced himself as Depardon and explained that he was the commander of the local coast guard outpost, here to ask Lord Simeon about the stolen cargo.

Lord Simeon replied, “I’m somewhat unclear on why you’ve come to me about this. Might I suggest that you direct these questions toward the ship’s crew?”

Despite the man’s much lower social status and military rank, Lord Simeon maintained a polite tone as he replied. However, the fixed gaze from behind his glasses—those light blue eyes cutting like shards of ice—combined with his physique and stature to make him more than a little intimidating.

I could tell at a glance that the commander was doing his utmost to maintain a menacing aura of his own and avoid any hint that he was daunted. “Based on our initial investigation, we’ve ascertained that only a small portion of the cargo

was stolen. For some reason, the pirates left every item untouched except for ten specific crates.”

“Those being?” Lord Simeon replied.

“The cargo they absconded with all had Earl Maximilian Flaubert listed as the sender. Your father, I believe?”

The stolen cargo consisted solely of the crates sent by my father-in-law? Was it meant to be delivered to Lord Simeon’s grandfather on Enciel Island? I wondered how much space ten crates took up—and what was inside them. I reflexively looked at Lord Simeon.

With no change in his expression, Lord Simeon replied, “I know nothing about any cargo sent by my father. Are you quite certain there’s been no mistake?”

The commander nodded. “The crew compared everything against the cargo manifest. I checked the documents personally. The goods were listed as bottles of wine. I must say, however, it seems like an awfully large quantity of wine to be delivered to a private individual if it’s not meant for trade.”

If it’s such a large quantity, I suppose there must be more than ten bottles in each crate. A single ball or dinner party could easily require a hundred bottles, however, or even two hundred. It didn’t sound particularly excessive to me.

“I know nothing about any wine shipment from my father,” said Lord Simeon. “I can only imagine there’s some sort of error.”

The coast guard commander stuck out his rather rotund stomach and huffed. “Nonetheless, it’s true. Those crates were on board and they were stolen by the pirates. It is quite odd, certainly. That’s why I’ve come to you with questions.”

The events that were unfolding gave me a strange sense of déjà vu. *Is there some connection between this and the quarrel over our luggage before departure?*

Lord Simeon looked at the ground for a moment, lost in thought. The cramped guest room had no chairs for receiving visitors, so the two men stood facing one another. I was sitting on the bed, while Joanna was standing out of the way.

The situation made me rather uncomfortable—and not only because there were not enough places to sit.

We're receiving a visitor in the same room as this bed. The room I slept in last night...together with Lord Simeon.

Joanna had made the bed after we woke up, so it wasn't as though the room was in an unpresentable state. Still, I'd have preferred not to have a stranger enter and see it. I momentarily found myself wishing we had stayed on board the ship. At least there, our cabin had a bedroom that was separate from the sitting room.

Lord Simeon noticed the insistent implication of my gaze and suggested taking the conversation elsewhere. Given the small size of the inn, the only option was to once again make use of the restaurant. Fortunately they had finished serving breakfast, so the proprietress was more than happy for us to make use of a table. She was even kind enough to serve us tea.

There the commander showed us the records and explained in more detail, but Lord Simeon still knew nothing at all and was unable to answer any of his questions. All he could suggest was that someone else had used his father's name when submitting the cargo. Since House Flaubert did handle some shipping of goods, it was possible that a member of staff had sent it. Ordinarily such a shipment wouldn't have escaped Lord Simeon's notice, but—as he suggested to the commander—it was entirely possible that they had decided not to bother him with it, since he had been so preoccupied with the wedding ceremony and reception, not to mention the courtesy calls required afterwards.

“Even so, it is quite peculiar.” Lord Simeon furrowed his brow and considered the matter as he stared at the documents presented to him.

I fiddled with my now-empty teacup and gazed through the window. *Such ideal weather for a peaceful stroll, and yet here I am, stuck inside. I was so hoping to put this unexpected detour to good use!*

To me, this unfamiliar town was like another world. Each and every nondescript street and building set my heart racing. It looked as though a character from a brand new story could jump out at any moment from behind one of the old stone walls or storerooms.

Lord Simeon's conversation with the commander did not appear to be drawing to a close. *I hope they don't insist that we return to the ship and continue the investigation there. That would certainly not be conducive to going for a walk.* I looked down at my hands, somewhat crestfallen. The soft sigh I almost heaved sank into the bottom of the cup and vanished. *I suppose I have no choice but to abandon this plan. What a shame, though, to waste an opportunity that might never come again.*

"Marielle," said Lord Simeon all of a sudden. I looked up, expecting to be told that we did indeed have to board the ship again, but his voice and expression had softened. "This seems as though it might take a while. I'm sorry that I can't accompany you, but you and Joanna should set off."

"What?" It took a moment for his words to register, as they had been so unlike the ones I had expected. *Set off? He's telling me it's all right to go for my walk after all?* "Oh, I see. But...are you sure?"

I was glad to be allowed to do this, but I still wasn't sure it was appropriate for me to simply leave. Had the situation been related to the Royal Order of Knights I wouldn't have had any reason to poke my nose in anyway, so I'd have left with a clear conscience. However, this problem concerned House Flaubert, so I couldn't treat it as none of my business now that I had married into the family.

"Honestly speaking, there's really nothing for you to do here. There's no need for you to stay just to sit and watch."

"Isn't that a wife's duty?" I replied hesitantly.

"I have no desire to turn you into an ornament. Whatever we discuss here, I can share with you later. You should have a pleasant walk around the town while you have the chance."

His light blue eyes held a kind smile. Joy welled up inside me and threatened to explode. I caught myself just before I leapt forward to embrace him. *No, I mustn't. Not in view of other people. Immodest behavior will embarrass my husband. I must behave in an elegant and grown-up fashion.* "Thank you very much," I replied instead, expressing my gratitude in a prim and proper manner.

"However," he added abruptly, "You must refrain from going anywhere off the beaten track. You mustn't stray so far that no one would notice if anything

happened to you. Don't forget that you're in unfamiliar territory and need to pay extra attention to where you go and what you do. If Joanna objects, you must heed her words no matter what. This town is full of hills and steep staircases, so watch your step very carefully indeed. If you happen upon any cats or dogs, you mustn't be so reckless as to stroke them or chase after them. If a stranger tries to talk to you, don't respond or go with them, and certainly don't accept any food they might offer you. Oh, and—"

"Lord Simeon, I'm nineteen years old. I'm a grown woman, not a small child."

He had managed to put quite a damper on the sense that I was flying free into the unknown. *My word! Once he begins with a lecture, it's so hard for him to stop.*

My protestation caused Lord Simeon to fall silent for a moment. He looked away and murmured, "I'd certainly like to believe that." Then he looked back at me and said, "Just be sure to return before sunset."

"I will!"

I hurried to retrieve Joanna and left the inn with a brief goodbye to the commander and the proprietress.

Outside, I was greeted by glorious sunlight and a gentle sea breeze. *Now, where shall I go first? It all looks so appealing!*

Joanna shook her head disapprovingly. "My lady, you're already neglecting to watch where you step. If you trip and injure yourself, your honeymoon will be ruined."

"Yes, I know. There's no need to fret."

"I'm not sure your words entirely match your actions."

Few of the houses had front gardens; instead, the entrances faced directly onto the street. I wondered if they had back gardens. When I tilted my head upward, I could see laundry hanging from lines reaching out from the windows.

The less affluent areas of Sans-Terre were similarly chaotic, but the atmosphere here was entirely different. Despite the narrow streets, the town felt relaxed somehow. Time seemed to pass slowly. The buildings reached only

two stories at most, so I had a view past the houses to the sky and sea stretching out beyond.

“What a shame that Lord Simeon couldn’t come,” I said to Joanna. “Even he can’t be used to this view. I’m sure he’d have enjoyed it.”

“He’ll be able to enjoy one very much like it when you arrive on Enciel Island, I’m sure. I must say, though, we appear to have had a run of bad luck. It started before the ship even departed. That gentleman from the coast guard... Dedonpar, was it? He spoke almost as though he thought House Flaubert was plotting something. It was quite rude.”

“I thought his name was Dopanper? I can hardly blame him for harboring a few suspicions given the circumstances. Anyone would find it odd for the only cargo that was stolen to all be under the name of Earl Flaubert. It’s also curious that the crates were full of wine. It’s not something you’d normally expect thieves to go so far out of their way to steal.”

As we walked around discussing the matter, we received undisguised stares from passersby wherever we went. *I suppose this is a small town. Tourists must be a rare sight.*

I continued, “If I heard the same story about someone else, I’d have my suspicions that the goods were secretly something else. The pirates must have known what was in the crates all along and targeted them specifically. They’re no ordinary pirates, I’m sure.”

“What if the master really did send those crates, but the goods inside were something confidential that can’t be sent via normal channels? Then it would be better if Donparali didn’t find out the full details.”

“Hmm. If that were the case, I’d still expect Lord Simeon to be aware of it. Oh, perhaps he was only pretending he knew nothing about all this! Although he certainly didn’t seem that way.”

If Lord Simeon had known about the cargo—if there was a secret he was trying to keep about it—he’d have engaged in a more thorough deception. He was more than capable of lying convincingly whenever necessary, so it would have been no surprise for him to keep this from me as well. In those situations, however, Lord Simeon never faltered for a moment. He’d have had an excuse

prepared before the questions were even asked. He wouldn't have let the conversation become so protracted.

The longer I thought about it, the more mysterious it seemed. The only explanation that made sense was that there had been a major misunderstanding—that it was someone else's cargo, or the pirates had made a mistake. One way or another, I didn't see how this could have anything to do with House Flaubert.

I wandered rather distractedly as we made our way down the hill. Soon we found ourselves not far from the port.

A cat crossed our path with a whole fish in its mouth, perhaps a present from a fisherman, and raced past us. *Maybe it's eager to ensure that no other pesky cats steal its lunch, or maybe it has hungry kittens waiting.*

As I watched it run off, a smile on my face, I suddenly noticed someone standing in the distance.

What caught my eye was his eye-catching head of red hair. I knew immediately who it was. How could I forget? It was the same young crewman from the *Decoration* who had, for some reason, stared at us both when we boarded the ship and when we left it.

He was wearing the same clothes, so there was no doubt at all. If I'd only seen him, however, I'd have simply assumed he was taking a break. What made the breath catch in my throat was the person standing next to him.

There beside the boy was a tall, burly man with a smooth head and a black beard covering half his face. I recognized him as well. How could I forget? I'd seen him only yesterday in a rather nerve-racking event that was burned into my memory.

It's one of the pirates that attacked the ship! The one who was giving the orders and seemed to be their leader! I wouldn't mistake him anywhere. Not that I ever forget a face, since observing people is my specialty.

Why was a member of the *Decoration's* crew in the company of one of the pirates? They appeared to be having a rather friendly chat. I was immediately struck by surprise and confusion—and then understanding.

Ah. I see.

“My lady?”

I whispered, pretending I was still watching the cat. “Joanna, I need you to go back to the inn straight away and get Lord Simeon. Don’t react too visibly, but those two men over there are part of the pirate crew from yesterday.”

“What?” She immediately raised her voice and looked over, but I hurriedly pulled her back.

“Shh. They mustn’t realize we know. The taller man was one of the pirates who raided the *Decoration*. It’s definitely him.”

“Are you certain?”

“Entirely certain. And the red-haired youngster beside him is a member of the crew. The pirates must have recruited a crewman in advance and had him operating on the inside.”

No wonder they had been able to execute their plan so flawlessly. The door to the cargo hold did not appear to open easily from the outside, so I’d been wondering how they had managed to do so without destroying it. Additionally, if they were only seeking a specific set of crates, I’d have expected it to take rather a while to find them. They should never have been able to finish the task and retreat so quickly. It was clear that there had been some sort of trickery going on.

As my understanding grew, one more detail emerged from my memory: the lights I had seen on the deck at night, one on the ship and one over the ocean.

That pair of blinking lights had to have been some sort of signal. That boy and the pirate captain were communicating with one another. Ugh, I swear! My first instinct was right all along! Those lights were a harbinger that trouble was afoot! But Lord Simeon insisted on saying whatever he thought would get me back to the cabin. If only we’d gone to check, then—

I realized, however, that if we had seen pirates sending messages, we’d have simply run and hid. The outcome would not have changed one bit.

The events that had occurred were frustrating, but unavoidable. What

mattered more was the situation I found myself in right now. It was vital that I not let these two out of my sight. They had to be caught and arrested.

“I’ll keep watch, so run and get Lord Simeon. Please.”

Joanna shook her head. “If someone has to keep watch, I’ll do it. I can’t leave you here on your own, my lady.”

Her dedication to her duties made her an excellent lady’s maid, but in this instance it was rather inconvenient. “Either way, one of us will have to stay here alone. I expect you’re a faster runner than me, whereas my skills lie in hiding in plain sight and remaining undetected. It makes the most sense for you to go. While we stand here discussing it, they might get away. Please, hurry!”

The red-haired boy and the bearded man were currently standing still and having a chat, but I couldn’t be sure how long they would stay there. We had no time to waste.

Eventually my pleading got through to Joanna, and she reluctantly agreed. “All right. I’ll be as quick as I can, so you absolutely must not do anything rash. Keep an eye on them—that’s all! Do you understand?”

“Of course. There’s nothing else I can do, in any case.”

Despite my efforts to reassure her, Joanna looked uneasy as she turned around. She hitched up her skirt and ran like the wind, giving no mind to whether her legs were on show. Townspeople descending the hill were rather surprised to see a young woman running past them with such an impassioned look on her face.

If she runs like that, she should reach the inn in about five minutes. That means it’ll be at least ten before Lord Simeon arrives. I just have to keep watching them for ten minutes.

Hoping it would be all right, I looked over at the pirates again. After confirming that they hadn’t noticed me yet, I hid behind a fence, pretending to be taking a closer look at some hanging flowers. No matter how much I suppressed my presence, I stuck out like a sore thumb in this environment. It was one thing to blend into the bustling crowds of Sans-Terre, but here I had to put in quite a bit more effort.

I kept looking downhill and then uphill again, aching for Lord Simeon to arrive at last. The minutes stretched out into an eternity.

Soon, the pirates began to move. Anxiously, I stepped out from my hiding place. I looked uphill again, but there was still no sign of Lord Simeon. It was still too soon, anyway.

I couldn't let the men escape. I had no choice but to follow them.

I untied my hair ribbon, then tied it to a nearby tree branch in a way that Lord Simeon would definitely notice and realize was a marker. Then I walked after them, staying close enough that I wouldn't lose them but maintaining the facade that I was merely taking a nonchalant stroll. I made sure to leave more markers along the way. Gradually I ripped off more and more of the decorative details of my dress, leaving me in quite a sorry state. It was a shame to ruin a dress made especially for the trip, but as they say, you can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs. *Besides, it's just a few pieces of fabric. I'm sure I can sew them back on again later.*

The pirates turned a corner and I hurried over. In a story, they'd have been waiting around the corner with some sort of ambush, so I stayed behind the wall and gingerly peered into the alley. It looked safe.

And yet, for a moment I felt it might have been better if they *had* ambushed me. In the mere moments it took me to catch up again, they disappeared altogether.

Did they notice me following them? Or go into a nearby building, perhaps?

My apprehension grew. The surrounding walls extended past me for quite some way, but I looked and saw that they led to a dead end. If I continued along this alley, there seemed to be no way through.

I took off my hat and placed it on the ground at my feet. I put a rock on top of it to make sure it didn't blow away in the wind, then stepped forward as surreptitiously as I could. I looked around. *They must have gone somewhere.*

I continued, careful to avoid making a sound, but I saw nowhere they could be hiding. Nothing but walls stood before me, with not a door or gate to be seen.

Could they have climbed over a wall? If they took the effort to do that, though,

it would surely mean they've spotted me.

Deciding it might be better to search the surrounding area than wander aimlessly in this cul-de-sac, I turned around.

Just then came a voice.

"You're a pretty gutsy young lady, aren't you?"

A figure descended, landing right before my eyes. I began to scream in fear and confusion, but a hand covered my mouth. His other hand grabbed my arms and pushed me against the nearest wall.

"That's better. Don't start bawling and making a big fuss, all right? I don't want to hurt a woman."

As he threatened me in a low voice, he looked out of the alley, making sure that no one was going to overhear and come to see what was going on. Then he looked at me again with a grin.

When I recovered from my initial shock, I noticed who had trapped me. It was the red-haired boy. His cat-like golden eyes were fixed upon me, mere inches away. Despite his current actions, there was nothing hardened about his expression; rather, he looked mischievous. He was probably a little younger than me. He was not especially tall, either—less than a head taller than me. Though he didn't come across as especially threatening, his greater strength still meant he could hold me with enough force that I definitely couldn't escape.

Another voice joined his. "What are you playing at? Why didn't you just stay hidden, you dolt?"

I looked up. The other pirate was sitting on top of the wall.

"You're wasting time," he added. "Let's skedaddle."

"Look, just hold on a moment. There's something I've gotta tell her."

What would a pirate have to tell me? "If you tell anyone about this, we'll kill you" or some such?

His cat-like eyes focused on me again. "That man you had with you. Don't trust him."

Excuse me? I'd been expecting some sort of threat, but instead I'd been given a warning. I suddenly forgot all about my fear. *The man that was with me? He must mean Lord Simeon. Is that why he was glaring at us? But why would he think Lord Simeon's not to be trusted?* I wondered if he had some sort of grudge against House Flaubert that had led him to steal the cargo.

All I could do in response was make a muffled sound of bewilderment.

"Stay still," said the boy. "Listen, I'm telling you for your own good. I know you must have been over the moon for a handsome bloke like that to make a move on you, but you don't seem to know what men are like. Maybe you can't help falling head over heels, but try to think it all through. Do you really think a ladies' man like that would want a little girl like you?"

Whaaat?

I had no idea what he was talking about. Or rather, I understood the words, but they didn't seem to fit the situation. It sounded like the kind of jealous comment one woman might make to another. When Lord Simeon and I had first gotten engaged, I'd been subjected to almost identical comments from the young ladies of high society. Why was I hearing the same sentiment now, from a man—a pirate, no less?

Is Lord Simeon's appeal so widespread that even pirates can't help falling for him? Vice Captain, you truly are incredible!

"A man like that has women swarming around him. He doesn't even have to lift a finger. I hate to say it, but he'd never go for a girl like you. You're completely average. Nothing about you stands out. You must admit that's suspicious. I know it's painful, but you have to accept the truth. You're being swindled."

I stared in disbelief. *A love-hate relationship between a pirate and a royal guard! It sounds exciting, but it's not exactly my area of expertise. The biggest fan I know of those stories is my best friend, Julianne. If only you were here, Julianne! You'd be thrilled to bits about this development!*

"If you're staying in one of the premium cabins, that must mean you're pretty rich. That's what he has his eye on. I don't know how much money you've given him so far, but it's not too late, you can still—"

The boy's passionate rant was interrupted when something flew and hit him from the side. He yelped and staggered a few steps, letting me go at last. I turned and saw Lord Simeon running over.

"Marielle, are you all right!?"

In a flash, he reached me and put his arms around me. Safe in his broad chest, I heaved a sigh of relief.

"I'm fine. I'm not hurt at all."

As I rested my cheek against him, he let out a heavy sigh as well and embraced me even more tightly. "Honestly, I take my eyes off you for a few minutes and this happens. You're taking years off my life, you know."

"Oh, that's far from ideal. You already have fewer years remaining than I do."

"Are you calling me an old man? I'd rather you didn't! Though indeed, I'm sure you have a long life ahead of you!"

After responding with his usual vigor, Lord Simeon immediately looked to the side. The boy was clutching his side and groaning in pain. A brick was lying by his feet.

"You threw a brick at him?" I asked.

"It was the closest thing I had to hand."

He must have taken it from a nearby wall—one that was already damaged, yes? There's no way he ripped it from a solid wall, is there? I wouldn't put it past Lord Simeon.

The boy grunted, tears welling in his eyes. The brick had hit him at quite some velocity, so it must have made a painful impact. Lord Simeon took a step forward, putting himself between me and the boy, but then the bald-headed man jumped down to intercede.

"This is why I said we should make a run for it!"

Seeing him up close, he was surprisingly young. He was probably still in his twenties. *Does he shave his head to make it look like that?*

The pirate threw a punch, but Lord Simeon dodged it with ease. While

protecting me, he grabbed the man's arm and twisted it. Despite his strapping appearance, he was brought to heel in an instant. He froze and let out a sharp cry of pain.

The red-haired boy huffed in frustration and put his hand on his hip. From the strange bulge in his long shirt sleeve I could tell he was hiding something underneath.

Wait! Is that what I think it is?

A sharp sound cut through the air. At lightning speed, Lord Simeon dodged the swinging weapon. He wasn't about to give the taller man an opening, however. He delivered a powerful kick that sent him crashing to the ground, where he lay, stunned and immobile.

"You bastard!" The boy tried to strike with the weapon again. This time he impressively managed to latch onto Lord Simeon. Rather than hitting hard with it, he had entwined it around Lord Simeon's forearm. Now a tense black cord reached between Lord Simeon and the boy.

Both of them braced their legs and pulled. A game of tug-of-war had emerged—but a moment later, Lord Simeon slackened. I thought he might have been bested, but the boy, who had been pulling with all his strength, quickly lost his balance and stumbled. In that instant, Lord Simeon yanked strongly.

The boy cried out. Unable to maintain his footing, he fell forward, flopping onto the ground like a fish on a line. The weapon flew out of his hand and Lord Simeon took it.

"What a fool you are. It's pointless to lock yourself into a pure test of strength when you don't have any backup. All it does is restrict your own movements. A tactic like that can only work if you're significantly stronger than your opponent."

The boy spat and swore. Anger began to rise on his face as he heard Lord Simeon's cold words, but then he was suddenly startled as Lord Simeon wielded the weapon in his hand with a snap.

"You can't use it properly just by waving it about in a way that *looks* impressive," said Lord Simeon. "This is how it's supposed to be used."

He swung it as he spoke. The weapon struck sharply. The sound cut through the air again, and the ground split open right in front of the boy. He whimpered and leapt up, but another swing followed, and his leg was ensnared the moment he stood up. He was mercilessly tripped up and hit the ground headfirst.

The boy had more fight in him yet. Without any time to stand up and get away from the repeated blows, he immediately rolled along the floor to try to escape.

His attempt was short-lived, however. Lord Simeon struck the wall, and the brickwork crumbled and fell on top of the boy, who could do nothing now except crouch down and cover his head with his hands. "Wait! Please, stop! Ow!"

Only once he had lost all will to fight back did Lord Simeon finally cease his torment. "I'd like to have broken a bone or two, but I'll refrain from doing so in Marielle's presence. If you don't wish to be injured for no good reason, I'd suggest you don't oppose me any further."

Indeed the boy was apparently uninjured, but his spirit seemed thoroughly broken. Lord Simeon had fundamentally ripped away not only his will to fight, but even his desire to run away. He sat there, trembling.

Lord Simeon looked at me again. "Marielle, you shouldn't have—" He froze as our eyes met, and muttered, "Oh no. Marielle..."

"It's no use. I can't hold back anymore. The sight before me is just so incredible that I've forgotten how to live. Dying is the only option."

"Marielle!"

"Where am I? Am I in heaven? Am I dead or alive? Have I used up all the good fortune allotted to me? I never thought, not in a million years, that I'd see you use a weapon like that today!"

I trembled wildly, unable to even breathe properly. The boy, who had been cowering in fear, suddenly looked surprised. "What's wrong with her? Is she all right?"

Lord Simeon pressed his fingers to his forehead with a grave expression.

“Marielle, pull yourself together.”

“I can’t! How could I? I don’t even know what pulling myself together feels like anymore! All I understand is love and pain! Three cheers for the Demon Vice Captain! All hail Lord Simeon! No one in the entire world is suited to a whip more than you!”

I writhed in agony, lost to the world, while Lord Simeon let out a deep sigh of resignation.

There in his hand was a weapon made up of a braided leather cord that extended from the grip, coiling like a snake and shining with a black luster. It wasn’t my beloved riding crop, but what is a riding crop if not a kind of whip? It was still essentially the same weapon I adored above all others!

Lord Simeon is holding a whip, practically the emblem of a brutal, black-hearted military officer! This is truly happening right before my eyes! A miracle has occurred! For this bounty, I am truly grateful!

“I’m glad to have lived, but it’s all over now. I’m dying. Build me a tomb.”

“You’re not dying,” Lord Simeon replied in a knowing voice. “You’re going to live a long and full life, I’m certain.”

Then he suddenly looked elsewhere. Joanna and the coast guard commander had just arrived and were catching their breath.

Chapter Six

Lord Simeon made the boy and the bearded pirate, who had recovered a little, sit against the wall at the end of the alley and began his questioning. Naturally, by this point the commotion had finally attracted the curiosity of townspeople nearby, many of whom tried to peer into the alley and see what was going on. Despite all attempts from Don—hmm, what was his name again? Despite all attempts from the coast guard commander to drive the onlookers away, this was a small town where everyone knew each other, so they didn't exercise any restraint around him. He appeared rather troubled by the number of people approaching.

Lord Simeon loomed above them. "First I'd like to ask your names. Or would you prefer me to simply call you Pirate One and Pirate Two?" His expression said that this was a formality and nothing more.

The boy huffed, then lifted his head and stated proudly, "I am the great Captain Phantom!"

Silence reigned. I, Lord Simeon, Joanna, and the commander all stared at him blankly. This awkward stillness made the boy lose his confidence in an instant. In a sulk, he murmured, "Well? So what if I want to be called that."

"If that's what you'd like to be called, I'm happy to oblige. Are you certain you won't regret it?"

The boy recoiled from Lord Simeon's frigid response. His pirate comrade clapped a hand on his shoulder. "Give it a rest. If you get lumbered with a name like that, it's only going to embarrass you in the long run. It'll be one of those childhood memories you wish you could erase."

The boy's face reddened just a smidgen. He pouted and reluctantly said, "Sasha."

Lord Simeon turned his attention to the other man, who introduced himself as well. "And my name's Charles."

This, too, was a name that provoked a reaction. *I don't mean to make fun of his name, but it's not exactly the sort of tough name I'd associate with a brawny bearded pirate.*

"He doesn't look like a Charles," whispered Joanna.

The man heard this, but he didn't grow angry. Instead, he smiled ruefully. "I know what you mean. It's the name my parents gave me, so I'm not exactly complaining, but they should have known what kind of kid they were going to raise just by looking in the mirror. That's why everyone calls me Roche. You can call me whatever you like. I don't mind."

Roche, meaning "rock." That does seem far more suitable.

Lord Simeon alone retained his composure the entire time. "Sasha and Charles, then. Very well. From what I call tell, it appears that Sasha was the principal offender. Isn't that right, Sasha? You joined the crew so that you could sneak on board the *Decoration* and operate on the inside. Did you have any accomplices?"

Sasha glared back at him. "Why should I tell you anything?" Despite his argumentative tone, he looked no more threatening than a kitten with its hackles raised.

"If you don't want to answer, that's your prerogative. I'll find out when I investigate. More importantly, why did you only steal the cargo that was under the name of Earl Flaubert? Cargo I had absolutely no knowledge of, no less. Did the crates really have wine inside them?"

"Pah," Sasha spat. "What does that matter to you?"

"That's the real question, isn't it? If you'd simply stolen whatever cargo you could get your hands on, this would be a simple case of theft, but clearly you had your eyes on a more specific prize. There's no denying how peculiar it looks. You're no ordinary thieves going after money and goods. What are you really after?"

Though his tone remained dispassionate, his eyes glinted with the familiar icy sharpness. He was intimidating enough already, but I knew the temperature could rise sharply, filling him with a burning hot blue flame. That was when it

was truly necessary to exercise caution. When he was that angry, he could turn bones to ash.

“Marielle,” said Lord Simeon after a pause.

“Don’t worry, I’m taking the situation seriously. I’m just jotting a few notes down so I remember.”

As I paid close attention to the interrogation, my pen raced across the pages of my notebook. *I’m keeping my fangirling constrained. Isn’t that enough? Watching the Demon Vice Captain interrogate his victims makes it hard to control myself, but I’m doing everything I can to hold on!*

After a single sigh, Lord Simeon gave up and returned his attention to the pirates. “If you don’t talk to me, I’ll hand you over to the navy, and their means of questioning won’t be nearly as friendly as mine. I don’t mean to threaten you, but they can be rather heavy-handed. Don’t expect to come out of it unscathed.”

“Are you trying to say that’s not a threat!?”

“I’m telling you the truth, that’s all.”

Suddenly the commander interrupted. “Hold on just one moment. I must insist that you hand them over to me regardless. You can’t possibly think it will all be resolved here in this alley.” Despite flinching when Lord Simeon turned to stare at him, he resolutely kept his head held high and continued, “The questioning and investigation are our responsibility, and we will handle them. You may feel free to continue with your voyage. I expect you’ll be contacted in a few days, at which point your assistance will be greatly appreciated.”

He spoke rather cuttingly, as though he was still suspicious of House Flaubert. Joanna grimaced, making no effort to hide what she thought of this.

To Lord Simeon, meanwhile, this was water off a duck’s back. “I have no intention of telling you how to do your job, but I’d find it quite inconvenient to be left entirely in the dark. I can’t let you handle it entirely out of my sight.”

“Are you suggesting that you don’t trust our investigative skills?”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but the most your local office will do is collect

reports and send them to the head office along with the suspects, yes? Beyond that, the investigation will be out of your hands, and you can in no way guarantee that it will be conducted fairly. Well?”

The commander’s round face grew even redder than usual. His thick eyebrows twitched so angrily that it looked like steam might come out of his head. “How *dare* you! Are you implying the navy would construct some fabricated story!?”

Lord Simeon looked back at him, unruffled. “Based on prior experience, I’d say that’s entirely possible.”

Indeed, Lord Simeon had been subjected to some serious mistreatment at the hands of certain members of the navy. Someone else had been pulling the strings, but the officers carrying out the plan had genuinely hated Lord Simeon and had tried to frame him. Somehow, even though his grandfather, Lord Donatien, had once been an admiral, there was quite some hostility between them and Lord Simeon. *I’d bet the reason his brother, Lord Adrien, joined the navy was partly to try and bridge the gap and act as a mediator.*

Honestly speaking, he was exceeding his authority in trying to interfere with the navy’s investigation. Despite his higher social status and military rank, he belonged to a different branch altogether. It wasn’t in his usual nature to meddle like this, but if he left it entirely in the commander’s hands, there was a risk of history repeating itself. *I’m sure Lord Simeon is quietly torn between rules and reality right now.*

I looked nervously at the two men, wondering what I could do to keep the peace. However, it was neither of them who spoke up next, but one of the men being interrogated.

“Stop!” interrupted Sasha in a loud voice. “Hold on just one minute! Don’t just decide it all between you! Who put you in charge to begin with!? You’re acting like you own the place, but you’re a criminal too!” He glared and pointed a finger at Lord Simeon, who knitted his brows in confusion.

I couldn’t let this comment go by without speaking up. “What in the world are you talking about? Why do you think Lord Simeon is a criminal? What a rude thing to say!”

With a look of annoyance, he spat back, “Didn’t I tell you earlier? You’re being swindled! Stop being infatuated and open your eyes! He’s a crook, and he’s taking you for a ride! Haven’t you ever heard of marriage fraud!?”

“What?”

I was so dumbfounded by the nonsense he was spouting that I couldn’t manage a more coherent response. My mouth hung open. *Is he honestly telling me he thinks Lord Simeon only married me as part of a scam? That’s both absurd and insulting!*

“There is nothing fraudulent about our marriage. We were married properly by a priest in a church. Just because you can’t marry Lord Simeon doesn’t mean you need to try and ruin my happiness.”

“Me? Marry him? Why would I want to do that!? To start with, we’re both men!”

“Love has nothing to do with gender. I don’t judge you at all for having secret yearnings. It’s only your despicable accusations that I take issue with. Telling lies about him is no way to coax him into an affair!”

“What!? Have an affair with a man? Ugh, no thank you!”

“I’d like to decline as well,” said Lord Simeon, cutting in with a sigh. His glance told me to back off for now. Appearing exhausted, he looked at Sasha. All the tension from before had evaporated. “Why exactly do you believe I’m a swindler?”

“You answer first! Who even are you!?”

“I’m Simeon Flaubert, Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights. The son of Earl Flaubert, who apparently sent the cargo you stole.”

The breath caught in Sasha’s throat when he heard Lord Simeon’s title—but a moment later he laughed raucously. “Blowing more hot air, are you? You, the son of an earl? Is that what you told her? Pretty shameless to use the name Flaubert of all things!”

He seemed utterly convinced that Lord Simeon was not who he said he was. The attempt to explain otherwise had fallen on deaf ears.

Lord Simeon shook his head in frustration. I happened to catch sight of the commander and realized that he was now looking at Lord Simeon with a suspicious glint in his eye. *Is he somehow taking Sasha's accusation at face value? Being accused of swindling on top of smuggling is simply too much.*

"Can you at least tell us the basis for your suspicions?" asked Lord Simeon. "Why do you believe I'm committing marriage fraud? Is it possible I resemble someone else who's been under suspicion?"

Sasha puffed up with pride again. "It's my flawless intuition!"

Lord Simeon closed his mouth, and the commander looked over at Sasha again as though glaring at a troublesome child.

Ignoring these reactions, Sasha pointed a finger at me. "It's obvious! Look at you and look at him! Why would a perfect guy like that shack up with a plain girl like you? There's no way! Someone who looks rich but is too unfortunate in the looks department to attract a man is the perfect target for swindling. An ugly woman like you who can't even get a regular man? You must have been jumping for joy when God's gift to women started buttering you up. And since you're not used to men and their ways, the second you were in his claws, you were done for. You've got to see how obvious it is when you're such an unappealing—"

Interrupting his self-satisfied rant, Lord Simeon stepped forward and delivered a punch to the boy's head. Sasha cradled his head in his hands and practically fainted in agony.

Quietly enraged, Lord Simeon made his thoughts known in an icy tone. "Accusing me is one thing, but insulting my wife is something I cannot abide. If you don't stop immediately, I can't promise you won't be digging your own grave. In any case, it's clearly an assumption you've made based on no evidence whatsoever. How absurd. I can easily prove I'm who I say I am."

He reached into his breast pocket and retrieved a small item that looked like a notebook covered in black leather—the identification carried by all police and military officers, which recorded his branch and rank. He opened it and showed it to the commander. The golden badge of the Royal Order of Knights shone brightly.

After looking at it, the commander nodded. “It’s genuine.”

Still rubbing his head, Sasha blinked. “No...”

“If this isn’t enough to convince you, you can gladly ask the Captain of the Order himself, or anyone from the palace. If that will take too long, we can arrange a meeting with the former Earl Flaubert on Enciel Island. He’s not so ancient yet that he’d forget the face of his own grandson.”

Sasha was still flabbergasted. From beside him, Charles—no, I’d rather call him Roche. Roche poked him and said, “So much for that. He’s the real deal.”

Realization finally dawned on Sasha’s face. His golden eyes turned into saucers and he repeated, “What? But... What?” over and over. His voice trembled as he looked back and forth between me and Lord Simeon. “You’re joking! You’re really his... He’s your... You’re a real couple!?”

I sighed and said, “I can understand your disbelief, but it’s true.”

By this point, it was well established that Lord Simeon and I were a mismatched pair. Plenty of people in society had found it just as hard to fathom. However, unfortunately for Sasha, there was nothing fraudulent about our marriage at all.

Now that he finally understood, we were all able to relax a little. However, we didn’t even have time to lament what a needless fuss Sasha had made before he spoke up again. “Really, though? Fine, maybe a handsome ladies’ man *can* marry a plain woman, but the age difference must be huge! If you’re together, doesn’t that make him a dirty old man!?”

When he unleashed these words at Lord Simeon, the air turned glacial again.

Now that’s one accusation too far! I looked at Lord Simeon apprehensively. All emotion disappeared from his face. Perhaps it was my imagination, but it felt as though the temperature of the surrounding air dropped. The commander seemed to have sensed danger as well; he stealthily took a step backwards.

“How rude,” I said. “Lord Simeon is *not* a dirty old man!”

“Of course he is! He’s got to be around thirty!”

“He’s twenty-seven! I’m sure he looks like an old man to you, but he’s still

perfectly young in the grand scheme of things.”

“Compared to you, though? He’s got to be more than ten years older!”

“Absolutely not! I’m nineteen!”

“Pull the other one! There’s no way you’re older than sixteen or seventeen!”

“You’re one to talk. You’re still a child yourself!”

“Me? A child? I’m sixteen! What difference does it make if you’re nineteen, anyway? There’s still a huge age gap. A twenty-seven-year-old bloke marrying a teenage girl is practically criminal!”

Wow, he definitely shouldn’t have said that. Sasha had unwisely voiced the thought that had no doubt briefly occurred to everyone, but that they were too polite to bring up. There was no protecting him now. I joined the commander in putting a little more distance between myself and Lord Simeon.

A low-pitched laugh escaped Lord Simeon’s lips. “I can see what you mean. In two months’ time I’ll be twenty-eight. Perhaps I should accept that I’m a dirty old man.”

He smiled and spoke in a gentle tone, but despite the apparent acceptance in his words, the temperature continued to drop. Sasha seemed to notice this too and fell silent.

Still smiling, Lord Simeon played with the whip in his hand. The slapping sound made Sasha and Roche back up against the wall in fear.



“Now, let’s put that to one side and return to the matter at hand. You’re going to answer my questions properly now, aren’t you?”

His tone could be described as calm. Nonetheless, Sasha blanched and nodded obediently.

It was Roche, who was kneeling on the ground in a well-mannered fashion, who began to explain. “We’re not really pirates, you know. I know that won’t sound very convincing after that performance, but we actually belong to the local guard on Enciel Island.”

“You’re in the local guard?”

“Yes,” said Roche, nodding and looking a little embarrassed. “We’re authorized to own guns. We’re not supposed to use them recklessly, of course, but if we were facing real foes, we couldn’t do anything without any firepower.”

They’re from Enciel Island? That means they’re residents of Flaubert territory. If they even have permission to own guns, the local guard must essentially be a military group. Thinking about it, I had heard something about Enciel Island having military troops. There were occasional disputes with the neighboring Republic of Orta, so there were even more military officers stationed there than here in Marable, keeping a close eye on them out of necessity.

Knowing that they belonged to his family’s own territory did not make Lord Simeon soften his attitude, however. Coldly, he replied, “In that case, why did you pretend to be pirates?”

“It’s a long story. This won’t be any surprise to you, but our island has been a way station for smugglers for a very long time. It’s the perfect place to stop off on the way to Orta or other countries to the east and the south.”

“That’s true.”

“If that’s not infuriating enough, lately there have been people doing it so brazenly that suspicions have been leveled at House Flaubert. They’re purposely trying to make the lord look bad. He keeps getting questioned by some self-important nitwits from the garrison. Things are getting pretty tense.”

Lord Simeon remained silent, his face showing no sign of surprise or doubt. If

problems along these lines were occurring in Flaubert territory, it stood to reason that he'd already know.

"So we agreed amongst ourselves that we'd investigate any cargo due for the island in advance, and we were on the lookout at Sans-Terre port. It's almost guaranteed that a ship that size will have something fishy amongst its masses of cargo. When we checked, sure enough, we were right."

"You realized the *Decoration* had some suspicious cargo on board?"

"Yes. The sender was supposedly Earl Flaubert, and all that fuss at the port made it even more suspicious. We thought about it and decided to make it look like pirates had stolen the cargo on the way to the island. Then you'd be investigated and arrested, putting a halt to the smuggling."

Lord Simeon raised his eyebrows at the audacity of this.

I, too, grew somewhat exasperated. "We certainly did come under suspicion, but did you not think that stealing *only* the cargo under Earl Flaubert's name would make you look more dubious?"

Roche shrugged awkwardly.

Beside him, Sasha began to make excuses. "We couldn't have taken anything else! We can't just go around stealing innocent people's cargo! We're not thieves! How would we give it all back?"

He's not wrong there...but wait! Does this mean he's actually a good little boy? He's an ally of justice? If so, I wish he'd thought this plan through a little bit more and realized how preposterous it was.

Roche rubbed his head and laughed bashfully. "Sorry. To be honest, along the way I started thinking it might not be the best plan in the world, but what can I say? We got a little carried away with it all. Everyone enjoys a bit of playacting. It was jolly good fun being pirates. It was our way of honoring our ancestors!"

I cocked my head. "Your ancestors?"

Next to me, Lord Simeon sighed with a great deal of irritation. "Indeed. Enciel Island was once a pirate stronghold. In the era before it became House Flaubert's domain, licensed privateers operated a base there. The present-day

islanders are their descendants.”

The word “privateer” made me recall a name I’d heard in my history classes. “Oh yes—wasn’t there one called Captain d’Indy?”

Back when the northern countries were often at war with one another, each country gave licenses to privateers who were permitted to attack other countries’ ships. Of those, the most prolific in Lagrange was a man named Florent d’Indy.

The men under Captain d’Indy’s command may have been called pirates, but they were quite different from the bands of thieves bearing that moniker today. Captain d’Indy himself was eventually granted the noble rank of baron, but unfortunately the bloodline of House d’Indy had later died out.

“Was Enciel Island his headquarters?” I asked.

“Yes,” Lord Simeon replied. “After House d’Indy died out, the island became House Flaubert’s territory. I say ‘died out,’ but of course, there are likely to still be collateral descendants who didn’t inherit the barony.”

Sasha stood and interrupted, proudly declaring, “That’s me! I’m his descendant! I’m the true heir to his honorable pirate legacy!” He proudly pointed a finger at himself. “And the *Phantom* is my ship. I may not have his land or his title, but his duty lives on! Me and my comrades work tirelessly everyday to fight evil and protect the island!”

Lord Simeon stared at him in silence, at which point Roche nodded with a half-smile. *So it’s true that Sasha is descended from Captain d’Indy. He’s also still young enough to have a spirit of adventure! What good fun!*

Lord Simeon pressed his fingers to his forehead as if he was trying to suppress a severe headache. “One Marielle is quite enough,” he muttered.

Excuse me! What on earth is that supposed to mean!?

I opened my mouth to object, but before I could, the coast guard commander, who had so far listened to the explanation in silence, spoke up. “So, what do you intend to do to these two?”

The commander no longer seemed suspicious of Lord Simeon, but that didn’t

mean he was happy. He stood waiting for an answer with a rather strict expression.

Lord Simeon thought for a moment, then replied, "If you don't mind, I'd like you to leave this matter in my hands for the time being. Most pressingly, I'd like to discuss it with my grandfather. If they really are part of the island's local guard, I doubt they can be acting entirely outside of his knowledge. Even if it was their own choice to dress up as pirates and attack the *Decoration*, he must have had some awareness of their plan."

"You're suggesting I let them go?" The commander's eyebrow twitched.

"I realize it's not what you had in mind, but I'd greatly appreciate it."

He stopped talking for a moment and walked over to the commander, who wore a quizzical expression as Lord Simeon whispered something in his ear.

The commander's face expression grew even more grave. "If that's true..." he started, but he stopped himself before saying anything more.

"It's still no more than conjecture, but it's highly probable. I'm sure you understand the trouble it would cause if it became public knowledge at this stage. Can I count on your assistance?"

The commander did not respond for a moment. I wondered what Lord Simeon had told him. I exchanged a puzzled look with Joanna while Sasha and Roche reacted in much the same way. As the four of us looked on, unable to follow, the commander let out something resembling a sigh mixed with a groan.

"Very well. Evidently I have no other choice. Only, can you please tell me the full details? I can't accept having to cover this up for you now and then be left in the dark forever."

"Yes, as soon as the truth is known, I promise I'll get in touch with you. If I don't, feel free to lodge a complaint."

I was rather lost, but it seemed that between the two of them, they had come to a decision. Reluctantly, the commander conceded. "Then I'll give the *Decoration* the go-ahead to depart. You should return to the ship as soon as possible. The other passengers have been demanding to leave right away, so I imagine the captain will be in quite a hurry."

“We’ll do just that. Thank you.”

The commander turned on his heel. He lumbered past me, his face still a picture of dissatisfaction.

I decided it was part of a wife’s duty to issue some sort of an apology. “Sorry for causing all this trouble, Commander Dotardepp.”

“That’s not even close! My name is Depardon!”

Oops. My attempt to smooth things over has only made him angrier. That’s no good.

I put on an ingratiating smile and began again. “My apologies, Commander Depardon. Your hard work is much appreciated.”

“Yes, it was *very* hard work.” Shooing away the townspeople who had gathered to watch, Commander Depardon left the alley.

After watching him leave, Lord Simeon turned around to face Sasha and Roche. “Now then. As you just heard, I’m taking charge of you both. I caution you not to misinterpret the situation. You are not free to go.”

Under his sharp gaze, they both ducked their heads.

Lord Simeon threw the whip back to Sasha. “You must do *exactly* what I say. No exceptions. Where is your ship?”

Roche pointed out to sea. “It’s waiting just around the coastline. Are you going to board with us? It’s not like that gigantic paddle steamer you’ve been sailing on. It’s a rough ride.”

“No, we’ll be returning to the *Decoration*. You too, of course, Sasha.”

Sasha looked bemused. “Oh?”

“You boarded under the guise of a crewman, did you not? Until we reach Enciel Island, you must continue to perform your duties. *Without* causing any more mischief.”

“All right,” said Sasha obediently. Lord Simeon’s firm yet measured tone didn’t leave much room for opposition.

I can understand how he feels. A matter-of-fact lecture from Lord Simeon can

be surprisingly effective.

“Is the cargo you took from the *Decoration* still on board your ship?”

“Yeah.”

“Then I’d like you to go straight to Enciel Island. We’ll reconvene there.”

“Understood,” Roche said, and took his leave.

We returned to the inn with Sasha in tow, then retrieved our luggage and went back to the *Decoration*. It seemed Commander Depardon was the type of person to work quickly; by the time we reached the ship, the preparations for departure had already begun. As we boarded, we ran into Daniel, who was just going to look for us. Apparently we really had been the only passengers to leave the ship and stay in Marable, so the ship left port less than an hour later.

“I never did get to look around in the end.”

Watching from the deck, I bid farewell to the coastal town as it disappeared into the distance. I knew it had just been an emergency layover, but it was still a disappointment.

“I think you’ll enjoy the scenery of Enciel Island just as much, if not more so,” Lord Simeon replied.

The waves created by the ship left a white trail in its wake. I was the only passenger gazing back wistfully. All the others were overjoyed to be resuming their journey.

“I hope I can come back here one day.”

I know there are plenty of other towns just like it, but I still want to walk the streets of Marable one more time. I want to enjoy the friendly company of the inn proprietress and the townspeople again. Maybe next time we’ll even make friends with Commander Depardon!

“Are you that taken with the place?” He laughed, somewhat mystified. Clearly he didn’t share my sentiment.

Stunned, Sasha jumped into the conversation. “It’s just a boring country town. There are towns just like it all over the place. One day there and you’d be bored stiff.”

Sasha had stayed with us ever since departure. I understood it was necessary in order for us to keep an eye on him, but I hoped it wasn't leaving too much extra work for his colleagues in the cargo hold.

"It's just houses. That's all there is. There's a reason none of the other passengers bothered getting off. For the rich ones, the ship's more their level of comfort. For the poor ones, why spend more money to stay at an inn when they've already paid for a cabin? I never thought there'd be a weirdo on board who actually cared about the stupid town."

Even though he knew now that Lord Simeon was the grandson of his island's lord, Sasha's attitude did not change one bit. Apparently this wasn't out of any particular dislike, but simply his personality. His comments were rather rude, but he could also be seen as having an honest and straightforward character, so it didn't bother me.

"And I never thought these were pirate-infested waters."

"Don't talk about me like I'm a shark or something! What kind of a future earl's wife are you, anyway!?"

"I'm more surprised that you're descended from a baron."

Lord Simeon shook his head. "You're two peas in a pod."

Somehow, Sasha and I had developed an affinity for one another. The sun rose higher, and soon it was midday. We were all rather hungry, so we set off for the restaurant, but along the way we happened upon a pair of familiar faces.

"You're back, then." Lionel's curt statement dripped with contempt. Alice was with him, too. Evidently they knew about our excursion into the town. "I thought you might end up in custody there, but I guess those local coast guard officers have a lot on their shoulders. Did you exert your authority? Or shut them up with money, perhaps?"

Lord Simeon stopped and stared back at him. "What are you talking about?"

Lionel sneered. Unlike with Sasha, I sensed nothing but hostility from him. *Fair enough if he has negative memories of Lord Simeon from childhood, but it's not like they've spent their whole lives seeing each other and fighting every day.*

Why is their relationship so tense if they've practically been strangers? He's a grown man. It should be possible for him to maintain some decorum even around a particularly hated relative.

"That's how you lot do things, isn't it? You put on a pure and honest face for the world, but in the background you're running all kinds of schemes. Don't think I'll let you use one of my ships for that. I don't care if we're related. I'm not taking part in a crime."

"I don't recall suggesting you should," Lord Simeon replied. "There must be some misunderstanding. Your concerns are quite unnecessary."

"We shall see." His voice became a barely audible murmur. "But I haven't forgotten."

Forgotten what?

I wasn't the only one who noticed this comment. Lord Simeon furrowed his brow and opened his mouth to reply.

Alice interrupted first, however. "Honestly, Lionel! You don't need to antagonize him like that." She spoke in a sweet tone as she clung onto his arm. "He's a relative you haven't seen in years. Try to get along with him. I bet those pirates only went after the cargo from House Flaubert because they thought it would be valuable. Lord Simeon's a victim, too."

She smiled at him. Her eyes did not turn toward me for even a moment, but I was grateful that she was making an effort to smooth things over.

"If he's back, it means the coast guard didn't find anything suspicious, so you don't need to doubt him either. We're all on holiday, aren't we? Let's forget all this frostiness and enjoy ourselves!"

Lionel looked down at her without saying a word. His cold glare felt slightly odd to me. *No matter how bad a mood he's in, or how much she rebukes him, she is his guest. Friends, lovers, or otherwise, they must get along well or they wouldn't be traveling together, would they? That's no way to look at someone who falls into that category.*

Rather than meeting her gaze, though, he quickly looked away. "I suppose." It did not look even slightly like he had reconsidered or accepted her reasoning.

Without a word of apology, Lionel walked off. Alice looked as though she wanted to carry on talking to Lord Simeon, but she gave a polite curtsy and then dutifully followed. When she caught sight of me, she sneered visibly. I still hadn't been able to get changed, so I was still wearing my rather sorry-looking dress with various pieces ripped off.

As we watched them leave, Sasha was the first to speak. "Huh? Wasn't that Mr. Duchesnay's son? Why does he have such a bone to pick with you? Did you have some big falling out?" He turned to me as well. "And that woman with him looked at you like she'd stepped in something."

I wasn't sure how to answer that. I decided a bitter smile would suffice.

I don't think she has any particular hatred towards me. She just doesn't care for me, that's all. She's not the first person I've met who feels like that, and I'm sure she won't be the last.

What bothered me far more was Lionel's attitude. If he really hated Lord Simeon as much as it seemed, I couldn't imagine it was due to nothing but a few childhood memories. Had something more serious happened between them?

I looked at Lord Simeon, but I couldn't read anything on his quiet face. He seemed to be lost in thought. He simply watched Lionel walk into the distance.

"That reminds me," I said, "what did you say to Commander Depardon in the alley? It must have been quite convincing."

I'd been slightly hesitant to bring this up so soon, but it was still on my mind and seemed like it might be related to what Lionel had said. What had been so persuasive that it had stopped the commander in his tracks when he was so determined to exert his own authority?

But Lord Simeon shook his head, put an arm around me, and started walking. "We can talk about it later. It's not something to bring up in public."

That was reasonable enough. We were in a rather crowded passageway, after all. If there was some secret, we wanted to avoid any passengers or crew members from learning about it.

For now, I focused on something better—the fact that we were about to have

lunch. Sasha also perked up at the thought of being able to eat with us in the restaurant, but at the entrance he was seen by a fellow crewman and sadly dragged away.

Chapter Seven

When the announcement came that we'd soon be arriving, the whole ship was suddenly astir. It seemed a great many of the passengers would be disembarking on Enciel Island.

Leaving Joanna and Daniel to take care of the luggage, we waited on the deck and saw the lush green island come into view from beyond the waves.

There it is, drawing ever closer. The paradise that has inspired countless poets and painters.

"It's just as beautiful as I've heard," I said to Lord Simeon. The terrain that spread out before me was more vivid than it had ever looked in pictures. Even the sea and sky were a completely different color than in Sans-Terre. *It could just be because the weather here is so fine, but I'm sure it's more than that. Either way, it's stunning. There's such a feeling of freedom and carefree abandon in the air.*

The area around the port had been developed into a rather modern town. Many yachts were moored there with triangular white sails; owning a yacht and a villa on Enciel Island was a status symbol that many bourgeois Lagrangians aspired to. Toward the center of the island, the elevation grew higher and higher, with a stunning natural landscape covering the mountainside. I'd heard that it rained often and that the mountains were a fertile source of crops.

"Is that the Eagle's Nest?"

I pointed to a place not too far from the port town with houses clustered together on a steep slope facing the sea.

"It is indeed. The village has remained largely the same for two hundred years. It's like a window into the past."

Since the location looked so much like an eagle's nest, it was commonly known by that name. It wasn't its official name, nor was it the only place in the world called that, but the Eagle's Nest of Enciel Island was renowned as

particularly beautiful.

Lord Simeon gazed calmly at the island he hadn't come to visit in so long. His family's territories on the mainland were closer, not to mention easier to get to since one could travel overland. It had been three years now since he had taken the time to come here.

"Can you see the citadel right at the very top?" he asked.

Further up the slope than the Eagle's Nest, right at the summit, was an old citadel made of stone. Its solemn, functional appearance was a vivid reminder that the seas around the island had once been a war zone.

"Yes, I see it. Is that where your grandfather lives?"

"No, it's a little too impractical," Lord Simeon replied. "He had a manor built in the town instead and he lives there. The citadel's open to the public. It's one of the island's foremost attractions, in fact."

"Ooh! I'd love to go there!" Actually, I wanted to see everywhere I could, just as soon as I'd successfully made it through my first meeting with Lord Simeon's grandfather. "Where else can we go?"

"There are quite a number of sights to see, including a few that aren't so frequented by tourists. You have some experiences to look forward to, I assure you." He smiled at me with a hint of teasing, as if he planned to show me a chest full of hidden treasure. *My word. I'm eager to go sightseeing, but his smile is a sight to behold already.* He continued, "I hope I can show you a rainbow, but that depends entirely on luck."

"Of course, the famous rainbow of Enciel Island! I hope I can see it!"

Due to the frequent showers on the island, rainbows appeared rather often as well. There were even novels with titles that referred to this. When a rainbow arched across the island, it was said to be a truly magical sight, like a fairy tale come true. Enciel Island was even known as the rainbow island, and it was rumored that its name came from the word "*arc-en-ciel*," meaning "rainbow." A lot of visitors came here with the express purpose of seeing a rainbow.

For now, the sky was perfectly clear, with only a gentle breeze. It didn't look as though the weather would take a turn anytime soon. Perhaps we'd be

fortunate enough to experience this wonder of natural beauty, but that was in God's hands.

At last, the ship docked and the passengers disembarked in droves. It occurred to me that Lionel would be getting off here as well, but the crowds were so thick that I didn't catch sight of him.

However, another figure did approach us through the tumult once we were on dry land. "What a relief to see you here safe and well. The delay made us rather worried." This man appeared to be slightly older than Lord Simeon. His linen shirt looked very comfortable in the hot weather, while the patterned waistcoat he wore over it was rather stylish. He also made an impression with his unusual silvery gray hair and narrow eyes like those of a smiling cat. He put a hand on his chest as he delivered his polite greeting. "It's a pleasure to see you again. It's been several years."

A faint look of surprise appeared on Lord Simeon's face, as though this wasn't who he'd expected to see greeting him at the port.

"Yes, it has been quite some time. Mereaux, isn't it? You seem to be in good spirits."

The man smiled broadly upon hearing his name. "I'm honored that you remember me. Incidentally, I've heard that you're newly married, so please allow me to offer my congratulations. Is this your wife, by any chance?"

"Thank you. Yes, indeed. This is my wife, Marielle."

Though I'd been standing a step back and watching their exchange, Lord Simeon wrapped an arm around me and gently pulled me forward. I gave Mr. Mereaux a polite curtsy.

Internally, I squealed with nervous joy. *Wait, did he just say "wife"? Wife, wife, WIFE! Lord Simeon referred to me as his wife!* Of course, I couldn't show any sign of this reaction, so I did my utmost to keep it hidden as it threatened to burst forth.

"And what a lovely wife she is," said Mr. Mereaux, turning to me. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Hector Mereaux, head of the Enciel Island branch of the Duchesnay Shipping Company."

I see, so he belongs to the company that ran our paddle steamer. No wonder he knew Lord Simeon was coming. Curious, though, that he came to welcome Lord Simeon rather than welcoming the owner's son, who was traveling on the same ship.

"Pleased to meet you, too, Mr. Mereaux. How thoughtful of you to come and meet us here. Incidentally, there was a member of the Duchesnay family on board with us—Mr. Duchesnay's son, Lionel."

"Goodness, I had no idea." He took a cursory look around. "Hmm, I can't see him anywhere nearby. I expect he'll be staying at the lord's manor or the Azema Hotel, so I'll be sure to pay him a visit once he's settled in."

And that was that. I hope he's not inviting trouble by being so apathetic about the matter. From what I know of Lionel, being ignored could make him quite angry.

Mr. Mereaux looked at Lord Simeon again. "What concerns me more is the reason for your delay. I received word that the ship was attacked by pirates?" He truly seemed eager to change the subject and avoid discussing Lionel any further.

"Yes," Lord Simeon replied, "although they caused no significant harm."

"It's quite shocking nonetheless. I'd never expect to hear of a pirate attack en route from Sans-Terre to Enciel."

"You're quite right. Rather unfortunate business."

Lord Simeon began a succinct explanation that sounded almost as if it had happened to someone else. I wondered if it might be better to give Mr. Mereaux the real story, given his position, but Lord Simeon had no doubt decided it was better to stay silent, just as he had a few days earlier.

I nonchalantly looked back at the ship and immediately caught sight of Sasha's red hair. *It certainly is useful for picking him out of a crowd.* Roche stood next to him; it appeared he had come to meet us at the port, having reached the island long before us in the *Phantom*—which was, after all, a much faster ship.

They both looked over at us but did not draw any nearer. *Perhaps because of*

Mr. Mereaux's presence? Instead, they waved as a signal to us. I surreptitiously nodded in response.

The background to this incident was rather a tangled web. When Lord Simeon told me about it on the ship, I had expected to be filled with excitement at receiving new details that formed part of the investigation, but instead, I mostly felt uneasy.

As promised, he gave me a detailed overview once we were back in our cabin after lunch. Rather than naming an individual as the suspected smuggler, he named an entire country.

“The Republic of Orta? The government itself is involved in smuggling?”

“I can’t say for certain, since I don’t have any proof, but that is my current assumption based on precedent.”

“Why, though? Why would a country need to do that?”

It seemed quite strange. That said, if there was a country I’d expect to behave in such an odd manner, it was certainly Orta.

The Republic of Orta, our neighbor to the east, was the quintessential military state. It was formerly a kingdom, but the royal family had been overthrown around twenty years ago in a major coup d’état. The new regime had apparently received firm condemnation from the neighboring lands, but they otherwise refrained from interfering. The governments of the surrounding countries rarely intervened aggressively in the domestic affairs of others, and with Orta in particular that was an unappealing prospect.

Though we’d had more than our fair share of quarrels with Easdale, our neighbor to the west, that was nothing compared to our relationship with Orta. Orta had been politically unstable for a long time and fought perpetually with its neighbors, which led to the other countries regarding it as dangerous.

“Their aim is to get their hands on weapons—specifically the latest models of firearms. Lagrange and Easdale’s development of weapon technology has progressed at a much faster pace than Orta’s. However, since we won’t export any of the latest models, Orta’s only hope is to obtain them through unlawful

means.”

I paused and considered a moment. “Which means they must have collaborators in Lagrange.”

“Sadly, yes. Perhaps you recall the original basis for a certain naval commander’s severe dislike of me. It was because I exposed a smuggling ring.”

Yes, I remember. It led not only to a great deal of trouble for us, but to a farce of grand proportions. I’ll never forget it as long as I live.

Duke Silvestre had finally begun to treat us more kindly, but I would never shake the feeling that he was someone I would rather avoid dealing with if at all possible.

I expressed this to Lord Simeon, but he replied, “For better or worse, Duke Silvestre’s purge was necessary. Without it, highly classified information was certain to leak from Lagrange.”

“Goodness.”

During that series of events, Orta had not been mentioned even once to my recollection. The duke had expertly manipulated the traitors into thinking the matter at hand was something entirely different, without giving them the slightest inkling of the truth. He was a skilled man indeed, reluctant though he was to use those skills. For him, a genius prankster who was the embodiment of obnoxiousness, it was nothing but a game.

“Enciel Island is on the border with Orta, so it serves as a watchtower. One of the reasons my grandfather left Sans-Terre to live on Enciel was to better observe Orta and contain them when necessary. Though retired now, he is a former admiral and still holds a great deal of influence. Part of the reason Enciel Island was granted to House Flaubert in the first place was to stand against Orta, and thus he works to fulfill that purpose. Since Orta’s behavior has been particularly egregious lately, he can’t leave the island for long periods, which was why he unfortunately couldn’t attend our wedding.”

So this is the real reason he couldn’t attend our ceremony or reception. I thought it was because the long journey would have been too taxing for him.
“You truly have military service in your blood. Keeping guard against smugglers,

too, it seems.”

“In the modern era, it’s practically our main job.”

“Smuggling’s kind of a fancy word,” said Sasha.

I looked over at him. Lord Simeon had asked Daniel to summon him, so he had joined us at the table. The soundproofing was fairly reliable in the premium cabins; as long as we didn’t shout, we could discuss such private matters without fear of being overheard.

He spoke between shoveling in mouthfuls of the cakes Joanna had laid out for us. His sheer joy at being able to eat such high-quality confections was so adorable that I offered him my portion as well. “Mostly it’s for the sake of tax evasion, same as you’d get from any country. It’s a little different when it starts involving weapons, that’s all. State-of-the-art guns are basically military secrets, right? I hear the reason they don’t export them is to stop the technology getting into other countries’ hands.”

“Precisely,” said Lord Simeon, pushing his own plate in Sasha’s direction as well. Despite Lord Simeon’s stern nature, he could still indulge other people. This looked very much like the behavior of someone with two younger brothers.

“The older technology has already spread far and wide,” Lord Simeon continued. “It’s not such a problem if those sorts of guns reach Ortan hands. However, we must do all we can to prevent them from obtaining the latest models. We’ve managed this so far, but Orta is putting in a great deal of effort. They’ve repeatedly sent spies, and their crimes even extend to kidnapping. Engineers with key knowledge must be kept under constant guard.”

“My word!” I replied.

“Sasha mentioned that the recent smuggling operations have been conducted in a brazen manner that appears to implicate House Flaubert. This is all for the purpose of eliminating the major thorn in their side. If we are no longer trusted and are made to withdraw from our position, their work will be significantly easier.”

As I listened, I suddenly remembered something that had been buried in the recesses of my mind. *Didn’t we face an accusation of smuggling before we even*

departed? When the customs officials wanted to check our luggage, was it related to all this?

I asked Lord Simeon, and he replied that he had assumed the same thing. “As I mentioned to you, it sounded as though they had received some sort of tip-off. That most likely came from an Ortan operative, who no doubt informed them that the crates under Earl Flaubert’s name were filled with contraband weaponry. The fact that they only checked our hand luggage was no doubt meant to lull us into a false sense of security. They must have planned for the cargo to be checked later and the contraband goods inside to come to light then.”

Sasha nodded. “Yeah. When we ripped off the bottom of the crates, there were guns crammed in there.”

“They must have anticipated that I would refuse to allow an inspection, since it concerned not only my luggage, but yours as well. Ordinarily, a noblewoman’s suitcase wouldn’t warrant searching, since it would be full of clothes and not much else, and would be the shape and size to hide a single firearm at most. My refusal to let them look must have made the customs officials even more suspicious, but if they had looked and found nothing, their insistence would have been difficult to justify.”

“Oh. I hadn’t imagined that the situation was so serious.” What I had written off as a mere malicious prank had in fact been part of a far more sinister plot, which was slightly terrifying to realize.

Noticing my anxious expression, Lord Simeon smiled gently. “Don’t worry. In the end, the cargo was never opened by the authorities anyway. It was taken away by the pirates.”

It’s true. On an official level, that cargo has now essentially disappeared.

When he heard mention of the “pirates,” Sasha looked up, his face a mess of crumbs.

Lord Simeon continued, “In effect, it was rather a boon for us that Sasha and his comrades stole the crates. I was placed under suspicion regardless, but I was able to deny all involvement by proposing that someone else had falsely used my father’s name—which was the truth, anyway. With the evidence missing,

there's no basis on which to suggest otherwise."

Sasha suddenly leapt up in a fervor. "Yeah, that's right! We helped you out!"

Lord Simeon put a hand on Sasha's head to push him down again and kept it there. "In all likelihood, there's an Ortan operative on Enciel Island who's expecting to receive the cargo. Can you bring the crates onto the island without being detected?"

"Absolutely!" replied Sasha, eagerly accepting the task despite the firm hand on his head. "This ship'll dock in Cours port, which is a long way from our village. No one ever goes to our village, you know. Not unless they're from there. Plus, we have a secret cove for hiding the *Phantom*—a pirate hideout I inherited from my ancestor! From the outside, you wouldn't even know there's a ship hidden inside!"

Despite my questions about why the local guard would possibly have any need to hide a ship, it was reassuring to hear such confidence. *Who knew their pretense of being pirates would come in so handy?*

Lord Simeon nodded and removed his hand from the boy's bright red hair. "Excellent. Please hide the crates as carefully as you can—well away from any prying eyes. Once I've spoken to my grandfather, I'll be along to visit."

"Roger that." Sasha then promised to contact the men on his ship in a confident enough manner that I was certain he had a means to communicate with them. *Those lights, perhaps?*

Lord Simeon arranged to meet Sasha again on the island, then left him to deal with the contraband weapons on his own.

The fact that Roche was here at Cours port as well suggested that he had already hidden the goods. Meanwhile, an Ortan operative was probably somewhere watching our every move. I couldn't make it too obvious that I'd seen Sasha and Roche. Even the brief signal they'd given just now could be disastrous if noticed, so I hurriedly looked away.

Lord Simeon finished giving Mr. Mereaux a vague summary of the attack.

"Oh, I see. The stolen cargo was under your father's name, but you had no

knowledge of it?”

“Yes. I have no idea who was trying to sully House Flaubert’s name or to what end. Nor do I know why that cargo in particular was targeted by the pirates. I’m intending to meet my grandfather now and share all the details with him, so if you notice any unusual activity at the port, I’d appreciate it if you could send a message.”

“I’ll be sure to do so. If the cargo was due to be delivered to the island, there must be someone waiting for it. It’s possible that they’re not yet aware of the pirate attack and will come here to retrieve the crates. I’ll be on the lookout.”

Lord Simeon had said nothing about the potential presence of an Ortan operative, but Mr. Mereaux had at least surmised that there was some sort of criminal band behind all this. He further promised to keep an eye on all trading of cargo at the port.

“It is a shame that these events have put a damper on your trip, but I’ll leave no stone unturned here. You can feel free to enjoy your stay. I imagine the lord is eagerly awaiting your arrival.”

“Thank you very much. I’ll leave it in your capable hands.”

Mr. Mereaux put a hand on his chest again and bowed. His hair, which was on the long side, hung down and provided a glimpse of the earring in his left ear. *That small black stone... Is it onyx? For him to have chosen that out of all possible stones, and decided to wear it in only one ear, suggests he has a very individual sense of style. Or perhaps he has a lover somewhere who’s wearing the right earring? No, surely not with onyx.*

Onyx had various meanings, including strength in battle, but it also symbolized discord and strife. It also held the exact opposite significance—it all depended on the feelings of the wearer, really—but if you were choosing a pair of earrings to share with a lover, you’d surely choose something else.

Perhaps I should get my ears pierced, I thought to myself as we left Mr. Mereaux and began making our way to the lord’s manor. I was a little scared of having it done, but wearing one earring while Lord Simeon wore the other would be quite magical.

I imagine he can't wear earrings in the military, though. What a shame. I decided to give up on making this dream a reality and instead made a note in my notebook so that it could live on through my characters. *A couple tied together by a shared pair of earrings. What a wonderful concept!*

I suddenly wondered if I might be able to get my hands on any novels from Orta. Humans had been professing their love for one another for thousands of years at least, so I was certain that Ortans, too, had written marvelous love stories. I'd read a book about their customs and beliefs but never encountered any romance novels written there. *This island is so close to Orta that it wouldn't surprise me to find some here. I'll have to look while we're sightseeing.*

As I mused over this and various other subjects, we soon reached the lord's manor. It was a quiet place, some distance removed from the hustle and bustle of the area around the port. The grounds were enclosed by a fence, but the building itself looked rather chic, with not the slightest intimidating air about it.

Eye-catching pink flowers covered the top of the fence: the bougainvilleas that were a common sight all over the island. My brother had once sent away for some, desperate to grow them at home, but unfortunately they couldn't withstand Sans-Terre's colder climate. *He must have wanted to craft a display just like this one.* The flowers were a bright and refreshing sight, climbing all over the bars like cream covering a cake.

The gate was opened for us. It, too, had bougainvilleas climbing all over it. Looking very closely, I saw that the pink portion was not the flower itself, but a sort of leaf that covered the small white flower poking through the center.

The manor's servants were relieved to see us given our delayed arrival. They greeted us with great joy, but unfortunately had to inform us that the key figure was absent. In an apologetic tone, the butler explained, "The lord was waiting for you as well, but since it took some time for the ship to arrive, he left to take care of an errand. He told us he'd be back before nightfall, so he'll be able to join you for dinner."

Given all my nerves about my first meeting with Lord Simeon's grandfather, this felt like something of an anticlimax. I'd spent all this time worrying about what I should say to this grand, imposing veteran, hoping desperately that he

would like me, and now he wasn't even home. It was a lucky escape, albeit only a temporary one. Part of me had been hoping to get it over with as soon as possible.

The butler suggested we rest a while to recover after the journey, but we weren't especially tired. We had been traveling on a ship that was very much like a high-class hotel, and the only downside had been the cramped nature of the rooms and passageways, so our more pressing need was in fact to go out and stretch our legs.

Lord Simeon and I were both in agreement, so we decided to use the time we had before dinner to visit Sasha's village. It surprised the manor's servants that we were going back to the port already without even getting changed. We left Joanna to unpack our luggage and retraced our steps on our own.

There was a possibility that Sasha had already returned to his village, since we hadn't arranged to meet him again so quickly. In that event, Lord Simeon said that we would use one of his grandfather's boats. However, Sasha's familiar voice called out to us the moment we arrived.

"You're back quicker than I thought." He smiled broadly, pushing up the brim of his straw hat. With his conspicuous red hair concealed, I hadn't noticed him until he spoke.

"Thank goodness you're still here," I said.

"Of course I'm still here. Who else is going to show you how to get there? Plus, if you use one of the lord's boats it'll stick out like a sore thumb. Better to be a little stealthy."

"That's true. How thoughtful of you!"

Lord Simeon could not deny the wisdom of this and let Sasha lead the way. We soon reached a tiny fishing boat where Roche was waiting.

Having had a rather terrifying misadventure on a small boat just the other day, I timidly stepped into the unsteady craft as it bobbed up and down in the water. Though it did have a cabin, that term was a little grandiose for what amounted to some walls and a ceiling that could keep any rain from our heads and not much else. There was a wooden plank that appeared to be a bench of

sorts, but sitting on it made the shaking of the boat course through my whole body.

“All right, then! Let’s go!” said Sasha.

He and Roche adeptly untied the rope and hoisted the sail. In an instant, the ship departed from the wharf. I wasn’t sure how fast we would go with only a light breeze, but it was soon clear how little I knew about sailing. The experienced duo made skilled use of the wind and had the boat obeying their will.

Feeling it a waste to stay crammed inside the cabin, I poked my head outside. The weather was beautiful, and I wanted to smell the salty air and feel the wind and sea spray on my face. “My goodness, look how far we are from the port already! This boat is much quicker than I expected.”

“Marielle, don’t lean too far. It’s much easier to fall off a boat like this than the *Decoration*.” Lord Simeon grabbed me from behind to pull me back. The way he tugged on the ribbon at my waist made me feel somewhat like a dog on a leash.

The boat followed the coast around the island. Though the area around Cours port had been quite urban, the further we got from it, the more varied the landscape became. Craggs jutted out of the water like giant pillars, and there were caves with deep tunnels to explore. Next came staggering cliff faces looming above us. Over thousands of years, volcanic activity and the shifting of the earth’s crust, not to mention erosion from the waves, had crafted the landscape into a breathtaking work of art. All I could do was stare in wonder.

After thirty minutes spent admiring the incredible scenery, a quiet fishing village came into view. It was an even smaller settlement than Marable, the town we had stopped at during the voyage.

Sasha pointed toward it. “There’s the village.”

The angle of the landscape was similar to that of the Eagle’s Nest, albeit not as steep, with houses clinging to the slope in much the same manner. At a glance, I could see why it wasn’t much of a sightseeing destination. As friendly and charming as it looked, there was nothing that stood out as a centerpiece that would draw in tourists.

After getting off the boat, we first took a narrow, winding path leading up the hillside. Soon we came to a staircase, and after ascending that we reached another steep trail. I began to wish I had worn more comfortable clothes. Though my shoes were more casual than usual as I'd chosen them specifically for traveling, the heels were still too high to be suited to this terrain.

Lord Simeon took my hand. "Are you all right, Marielle?"

He's able to take even this tough climb in his stride, regardless of how he's dressed. I suppose if this was enough for him to be out of breath, he wouldn't make a very good military officer.

I stood to catch my breath, just as I might in a ballroom after a strenuous dance. "I...wouldn't mind taking a short break." Drenched in sweat, I retrieved a handkerchief from my bag and used it to wipe underneath my glasses. *Oh dear, I'm going to ruin my makeup.* "It must be rather a struggle to go up and down here every day."

"If this has got you worn out, you better not go to Pasini," said Sasha. He and Roche showed no sign of being perturbed at all; I was the only one who huffed and puffed as I spoke.

"That's the real name of the Eagle's Nest, isn't it? I hadn't realized it would be like this. I wanted to go, but it might be too challenging for me."

Although I slowed the party's progress considerably, we did eventually climb high enough to reach the village, where people going about their days stopped and said hello to the returning young men. The atmosphere was like that of one big family. Much like in Marable, Lord Simeon and I were outsiders, looked at with a great deal of surprise and curiosity.

A youthful voice came from above us on the slope. "Sasha!" There stood a girl of about Sasha's age, her straw-colored hair tied into pigtails. She wore an apron made of undyed cloth over the top of her red skirt. Indignantly, she put her hands on her hips and said, "Finally! Jacques and the others got back ages ago. Did you get lost!?"

Sasha replied in an irritated tone, "Who cares? I had work to do. This is how long it took."

“What do you mean, ‘work’? You’re just pretending to be a pirate.”

“I’m not pretending!”

Interesting! Veeery interesting! The dynamic between them set off my instincts as a romance author. *They could be brother and sister, but I’m sure they’re not. Let’s just see, though!*

“And you! I can’t believe my own brother is playing along with Sasha’s silly games!” She directed this next grievance toward Roche.

I see! So she’s Roche’s sister, not Sasha’s. I must say, though, she and Roche don’t look very much alike. I wouldn’t describe her as beautiful necessarily, but she is rather cute, with something of a youthful and innocent quality to her. I imagine Roche would seem younger as well if he shaved his beard and let his hair grow out.

“They’re not just games!” blared Sasha. “Forget it, Lara! Is Gramps around or not?”

So her name was Lara. She puffed her cheeks out in response to his rude treatment. “Yes, he’s here. He’s been waiting for you all this time. You shouldn’t keep making him worry.”

Despite how much we stood out, it appeared she only had eyes for Sasha. I was grinning with glee watching this adorable exchange when Lara finally noticed us.

“Hmm? Who are they?” She looked inquisitively at both Sasha and Roche.

Sasha simply barged past her. “Guests of mine. The rest doesn’t matter.”

Lara yanked his sleeve to stop him. “Doesn’t matter!? Of course it does! They seem pretty important. Look at their clothes, and just *look* at that man! What have you gotten yourself into!?”

It must have been rare for nobles or anyone wealthy to visit this small fishing village. The villagers had no doubt built up an image of such people as “important” and thus somewhat terrifying.

Sasha turned to look at us as though he had only just made this connection. “Important? The gentleman, maybe, but his wife... I wouldn’t say she’s anything

special.”

I glared back at him. “Neither would I, but it’s still rather frustrating for you to express that with so much conviction!” Then I smiled at the girl. “Lara, it’s lovely to meet you. We come from Sans-Terre, and we met Sasha along the way. He kindly invited us to the village. My name’s Marielle, and this is...my husband!”

I had intended to give a smooth introduction, but I stumbled halfway through. *Eek! I said it! I actually said it! I referred to him out loud as my husband for the very first time!*

Though he didn’t say a word, Lord Simeon picked up on this as well. His pale cheeks reddened very slightly, and he cleared his throat to try and distract from it.

My, how charming! The longer I look at him, the more shy and awkward he becomes!

“Ugh!” cried Sasha. “Suddenly you’re getting all lovey-dovey in front of everyone! Are you newlyweds or something!?”

“We are indeed—and we’re very much still in the honeymoon phase!”

“Gah, I shouldn’t have asked!” He cradled his head in his hands while Roche wore a wry smile.

Lara, meanwhile, looked at us as if she’d heard something very surprising indeed. “You’re married?”

The eyes staring at me and Lord Simeon said more than words ever could. In particular, she turned a rather accusatory gaze on Lord Simeon. Her reaction was much the same as Sasha’s had been. *I just hope she doesn’t say the same thing he did.*

I glanced at him surreptitiously. Lord Simeon looked as though his feelings were genuinely hurt. *Honestly, he’s still in his twenties, and an age difference like ours is hardly unusual in the world of the nobility.*

I nestled up against his arm and softly stroked it to try and soothe him. I knew it was only because I was so young, not because he was too old. No one could ever be more dashing than Lord Simeon, no matter his age. *He’ll be dashing*

even when he's an old man!

Chapter Eight

A building almost right next to us turned out to be Sasha's house. He boisterously opened the creaking door and shouted, "Gramps, I'm back!"

"I heard you from in here," came a friendly voice in reply. We walked inside, ushered in by Sasha. The entryway doubled as a storage room, with pots and crates covering the floor and all sorts of fishing equipment propped up against the walls. Disorganized though it appeared, I had the impression there was a certain kind of order to it. Beyond that, an elderly man sat on a small stool peeling potatoes. He smiled and said, "When Jacques and the others got back, I assumed you couldn't be far behind, so I made a start on the food."

The man was very tanned, as I'd expect of a fisherman, and his wonderful smile was not just warm and friendly, but had a hint of refinement as well. His body was rather large and muscled despite his advanced years, likely because his work involved physical labor, and he sat with his back straight.

There was no hint of surprise on his face when he saw us. Rather, he welcomed us warmly. "I see you've brought some guests."

"Yeah, they're here because of my work. Don't go crazy when you hear this, but the bloke is the lord's grandkid. Wait, is grandkid rude or something? Am I meant to say fine and honorable grandson? Anyway, that's what he is!"

He noticed my scowl halfway through and tried to correct himself. *He really has no manners at all!*

"What matters is, he's pretty high up the food chain. And that's his wife."

Is that cursory mention all I warrant? I could have done without Lord Simeon's family being compared to the animal kingdom as well.

"Well I never," said the old man. "And to think, they've come all the way to this little village."

Sasha's half-hearted explanation had apparently been enough for the old man to understand and accept the situation. *They do say that age brings serenity. In*

practice, I suppose that simply means that the elderly aren't so focused on details that don't matter. That's probably why he's not concerned about asking questions.

"Anyway, come in and make yourself at home. The fishermen just shared a fair amount of shrimp and shellfish with me, so I hope you're looking forward to a tasty stew. Lara, you don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all!" she replied. "Why don't you sit down?"

Her tone suggested she was essentially part of the family, spending enough time here to treat us as guests and the house as her own.

Though I had no hesitation in doing as she encouraged, Lord Simeon declined. "As grateful as I am, I'm afraid Sasha and I have something to take care of first. Marielle, would you mind waiting here?"

"What?"

Now he's leaving me out all of a sudden? I turned to look at him. He seemed ill at ease somehow, as though perhaps he found it disagreeable to be stepping foot in a commoner's home.

"You should take the time to rest. I simply need to confirm with my own eyes that the storage site is as secure as promised. You don't need to join me for that, do you?"

"I suppose not, but I still want to see it." Somewhere on this island, Sasha and his men had hidden the crates of guns. We had come here to take a look at the hiding place, so it felt as though the promise of this had been dangled in front of me and then cruelly ripped away. "Am I really not allowed to come?"

"I wouldn't put it like that. Only, I suspect it might be a tad difficult for you. Sasha, how far is it to the location?"

Sasha put a finger to his chin and mused. "It's a walkable distance, but there are some hills, and a river. If the walk up here had you gasping for breath, you'll struggle for sure."

I groaned, unable to reply otherwise. *Forgive me, beautiful countryside. I underestimated you. You're a tougher nut to crack than I thought. If only I'd at*

least brought more sensible shoes!

“Don’t worry, I’ll tell you everything later.” Then, seeing the frustration on my face, Lord Simeon made a thoughtful attempt to persuade me. “I have an idea. Why don’t you help with the cooking? We shouldn’t eat too much before dinner, but I would rather like to have a little bit before we leave.”

That suggestion raised my spirits immediately. *I could cook! Me! For Lord Simeon!*

What an appealing prospect this was—a momentous opportunity indeed! Preparing delicious food for my husband was one of the duties of being a wife!

“I would love to! Lara, you don’t mind if I help, do you?”

Hesitantly, she said, “Well, no, not at all, but...”

“Can you even cook?” interrupted Sasha, unreservedly giving voice to Lara’s thoughts.

With a confident smirk, I said, “What do you take me for? I’ve been training to be a proper wife. I’ve had my cook teach me, and I passed with flying colors!”

“Fair enough. I wouldn’t mind eating some real noble grub,” said Sasha in a surprisingly frank expression of interest. Hope dawned on his mischievous face. Perhaps he was still upset that he’d been prevented from entering the restaurant on board the *Decoration*.

Trust me, I’ll make something you can’t resist!

Without even sitting down, Lord Simeon, Sasha, and Roche began to leave. On the way out, Lord Simeon spoke to the old man. “Apologies for the inconvenience, but I’d like to leave her in your care for now.”

“That’s fine with me. I’m sure she’ll have plenty of fun with Lara. Go ahead. You don’t need to worry.”

Lord Simeon thanked him and then walked out of the door. After seeing the men off, I turned back to Lara, full of excitement at the prospect of cooking. “Now, let’s start!”

“Oh, erm, yes.”

First I had to tie my hair back. My cook had taught me that hygiene was the most important thing of all. Seeing me gather up my hair, Lara suddenly began to rush off in a mild panic. “I’ll run and get you an apron and a kerchief! Just wait here!”

“Oh, you don’t need to go out of your way.”

“It won’t take a moment! I live right next door.”

Aha, I see. So she and Sasha are neighbors. They’re the archetypal childhood friends from a story. How thrilling!

As promised, she was back in an instant with the items in question. I put them on, then we washed our hands and set about preparing the food together.

“I’m surprised that a noble girl—I mean, woman—would be so interested in cooking. Don’t you have servants to take care of that?”

“We do, yes. There are servants specialized in cooking who normally handle everything in the kitchen. I just really wanted to be able to make things by hand for Lord Simeon, so I pushed back against the notion that it was unnecessary and insisted on receiving lessons.”

“Gosh. It sounds like you really care about your husband. Were you in love before you were even engaged?”

“No, not exactly. Hmm, how can I explain it? It was an arranged marriage to begin with, but it turned out there was a little more to the story.”

I smiled awkwardly, and Lara sighed, appearing somewhat jealous. “I can tell from looking at you that you both love each other, though. How romantic.”

“What about you and Sasha? Childhood friends can sometimes turn out to be more.”

When I brought up this notion, her round cheeks turned the color of rosy red apples. *My goodness, she is truly adorable. My next novel will HAVE to be about a couple who have been friends since childhood!*

“We’re just neighbors. We get along well I suppose, but so do all the children in the village.”

“But you’re cooking for him, aren’t you? I’m sure this isn’t the first time.”

“No, but...”

Though pausing for thought, Lara continued dexterously chopping the vegetables. *What incredible speed—and she doesn’t slow down for a moment even during a conversation. I’d better redouble my efforts!*

“Sasha’s parents passed away when he was twelve. He doesn’t have any other relatives, so we started taking care of him.”

I turned to look at the door leading to the next room. “What about his grandfather?”

Lara shook her head. “Sasha calls him ‘Gramps’—we all do, really—but he’s not his real grandfather. Apparently he was good friends with Sasha’s deceased grandfather, which was why he became Sasha’s guardian. Even though Sasha lives in a normal-looking house like this, he’s descended from a baron who used to be the lord of the island, so he has an inheritance. Just some land, but there are bad people out there who wish they could get their hands on it. Gramps is the one protecting him from that. He doesn’t live here, but he comes back every so often to see how Sasha’s doing.”

“That makes sense,” I said as I sieved the flour. “What about that splendid ship? Was that part of his inheritance?”

“The *Phantom*, you mean?” Her bitter smile said she didn’t entirely approve. “He got it by selling some of the land his parents left him. He went around boasting about how it was the latest model of high-speed cruiser, but I bet his relatives are rolling in their graves.” She shook her head again as she took out a lump of butter, a piece of which she kindly gave to me.

“It looks like he’s making good use of it, though. Sasha and Roche are essentially part of the military, aren’t they? That’s the impression I have of their local guard organization.”

“That’s true, I suppose. Having a ship means he can take on work like that and earn a good wage doing it. I just don’t like that it means he’s going up against poachers and smugglers all the time. We’re practically family, so I want him to be safe.”

“I know what you mean. Lord Simeon is in the Royal Order of Knights, so he

sometimes has to take on highly dangerous missions. I can't stand waiting at home and being able to do nothing about it."

"And he never even thinks about that! He just says 'It's my job!' and won't even give me any of the details. How can I help worrying if I don't have the slightest clue what he's been up to?" She punctuated her words by repeatedly slamming her fist into the meat.

"Exactly! That's just it! I know he's bound by confidentiality and he can't really talk about it, but if I don't know what's going on, of course I'm going to worry. The least he could do is apologize for leaving me in the dark, but he just acts as though there's nothing wrong! We once had a gigantic argument about it."

I punctuated my own words with repeated swings of the rolling pin.

We both turned to look at one another.

"Men just..."

"...don't understand..."

We both raised our arms to emphasize the final word with a final violent swing.

"...*anything!*"

As we expressed our anger in unison, the door opened behind us and Gramps entered holding a basket. "I finished peeling the potatoes."

"Thanks!" said Lara, taking them and putting them with the other ingredients.

Gramps grinned and looked at both of us. "I see you're getting along very well indeed. I'm sure you'll make a fine meal."

Lara and I turned to one another again and both giggled. *Cooking is something you have to put your feelings into—that's what my cook taught me. Maybe rage can be the secret spice that makes it especially delicious.*

Lord Simeon and the others returned just as the food was almost ready to serve. It was too late for lunch and too early for dinner, but Sasha flew over to the table as though he was completely famished.

When he saw the food there, however, his face fell. "Is this it?"

Lara scowled when she saw his disgruntled reaction. “What’s wrong? Is this not good enough?”

If he indeed says that it’s not good enough, I’m sure he’ll incur divine wrath. She’s made a delicious meal just for him!

The stew made of freshly caught seafood was only the start. A whole delicious spread had been laid out before him.

“No, I’m not saying that. It looks yummy. But...isn’t it the same as always?” He turned to me and demanded, “What did *you* make?”

Steam was rising from the basket in my hands. I presented it to him. “Here. Bon appetit!”

He screwed up his face. “Bon appetit? It’s just bread!”

“Yes. I hope you like it!”

Sasha looked back and forth between me and the piping hot bread. “This is what you made?” He slowly pointed at it.

“This is what I made! It’s fresh out of the oven. You came back just at the right moment!”

“And this is *all* you made? Just bread, nothing else!?”

The bread rolls packed into the basket were golden brown. The lovely scent of butter wafted from them. I was thoroughly satisfied at a job well done, but Sasha’s complaints became even more vehement.

“After all your bluster, the only thing you made is bread!?”

“Bread is one of the most fundamental parts of a meal. It’s an important staple food.”

“Well, yeah, I know, but you said you were going to cook! This is *not* what I had in mind!”

“Last time I checked, baking falls under the banner of cooking. My cook said that making bread is the first step on the road to being an excellent cook. I asked Lara to make sure the oven was the right temperature, but apart from that I did everything myself.”

“You made someone else do the hardest part! If Lara hadn’t been here, we wouldn’t have even had any bread, let alone the rest of the food! Do you think bread on its own is enough to feed your husband!?”

“But this was the only thing I could get my cook to teach me, because you can make it without using a knife! If it bothers you that much, you needn’t have any. I made it for Lord Simeon, not you!”

“With my ingredients!” he raged.

Lara whacked him on the head with a tray. “Sasha, you insensitive dolt!”

“What are you angry with *me* for!?” Tears welled in his eyes again. *That looked like it hurt rather a lot.*

I began to tear up for a different reason. Lara had made all sorts of different things in such a short space of time, but all I’d managed was some bread. I couldn’t help feeling inadequate no matter how much I told myself that this was only natural given her much greater experience.

Lord Simeon took the basket from my hands. “It smells delicious. Did you really make this yourself? What a pleasant surprise. I could have mistaken it for bread from a real bakery.”

See? I did a good job! I’d put my heart and soul into it, certain that I could bake bread and be proud of it, even if it was the only thing I could make.

Sasha scoffed at Lord Simeon’s comment. “Anyone can make bread. It’s a normal thing you get in every home. I could make it if I wanted to.”

Maybe that’s true in this village, but Sans-Terre is full of specialist bakeries!

Lara swung her tray once more and Lord Simeon glared at him with a very sharp gaze indeed.

With a sigh, Roche offered some practical advice. “Sasha, put a sock in it. They’re newlyweds. This is the kind of thing that makes them happy.”

Gramps laughed raucously at this exchange. He came over and picked up one of the bread rolls. “Roche is quite right. If you try to stand in the way of their love, all you’re likely to get is a punch to the face from the husband. Gosh, this smells wonderful. There’s nothing like freshly baked bread.” He tore open the

roll and took in the scent, then popped a piece into his mouth. Moments later, he gave a nod of satisfaction. “It tastes just as good as it smells. A wife who can bake delicious bread is an excellent wife in my book.”

His kind words and warm grin were incredibly heartening. *What a lovely man!*

Lord Simeon and I smiled at one another and sat down beside each other at the table. Lara, Roche, and the old man joined us, ready to eat.

There was one minor voice of protest—a cry of “There’s no seat left for me!”—but we all quietly ignored it.



We enjoyed a cheerful and pleasant mealtime and left before it got too late. Lord Simeon asked Sasha and Roche to continue keeping the guns secure, then we returned to the manor. His grandfather had not yet returned, but a message had arrived from Mr. Mereaux at the port.

Lord Simeon looked down at the message card. “It seems he had no luck spotting whoever was meant to receive the cargo. They must have been informed about what happened.”

It seemed Orta was not about to give us a lead quite so easily. I looked at the card myself. There in neat handwriting was a promise to investigate a little further.

“Could there have been a co-conspirator on board the ship?”

“That’s quite possible, yes. We don’t know who might be an Ortan operative, so we must proceed with caution. Any discussion of this topic where others might hear must be avoided.”

“Understood.”

The situation was far from ideal. We had no idea who might be working against us—it could be anyone—but they already knew about us. In terms of information warfare, we were losing.

“Are the guns really secure? There’s no chance they’ll be found and stolen? Part of me wonders if it might not have been better to immediately bring them here to the lord’s manor.”

Lord Simeon thought for a moment, then shook his head. “Transporting them here would draw too much attention. I don’t mean to cause you any alarm, but we can’t exclude the possibility of enemy spies here as well, and in the military garrison. The weapons are much less likely to be seen by the enemy in Sasha’s village.” He unfolded his arms and smiled with some measure of delight. “It’s a very good hiding place. They’ve made use of a naturally formed cave, the entrance of which is hidden from view. Even the locals would never find it, other than the ones who know it’s there. Sasha understands the gravity of the situation. He’s promised that he and his men won’t say a word to anyone outside of the local guard. I’m sure the guns are safe there for the time being.”

“Could that cave be somewhere pirates used to hide their treasure?”

A secret cave on an island inhabited by pirates—that was a premise that often came up in adventure stories.

In reply, Lord Simeon’s smile deepened. He nodded and said, “Yes, that’s what Sasha told me. His pirate games are nothing to sniff at. Initially I took him for nothing but a naive boy, but we’ve actually gained a valuable ally—and having one of those amongst the local population is especially beneficial. We definitely won’t be beaten.”

This far from the palace, we couldn’t rely on His Highness or the Royal Order of Knights, but with those words of conviction, Lord Simeon had wiped away my anxiety as to what avenues that would leave. If he was able to smile and guarantee that things would be fine, then I could believe it.

If this is a pirates’ island, then the family in charge of the island must be the head of the pirates. No foe can possibly stand up to them!

“Speaking of pirates, an eyepatch would be excellent. If you wore an eyepatch, I would fangirl so hard. Combine it with a whip and you might as well dig a grave for me already.”

“An eyepatch?”

Lost in a delusion—I mean, daydream—of Lord Simeon going into battle under a skull and crossbones flag, I barely registered his puzzled question.

“There’s nothing wrong with my eyes.”

“Let me have my dreams.”

“What kind of a dream is that?”

I chuckled to myself as I played with the card in my hands. Suddenly, the methodically formed letters caught my eye again. “How much can we tell Mr. Mereaux about the situation?”

Lord Simeon didn’t answer straight away. He seemed to muse over something for a few moments before he finally spoke.

“We still can’t tell him everything. There’s a very high chance that a spy has infiltrated the Duchesnay Shipping Company.”

“That makes sense. It would make their smuggling operation much easier.”

“Indeed. It’s better not to give him any more details than I did at the port. We should pretend we have no idea about any Ortan intrigue.”

“Fair enough. I’ll be careful.”

The handwriting was so neat that it almost looked like printed text, suggesting the writer was very scrupulous indeed. It was clear and easy to read, with all the letters perfectly formed. At a glance, it was the sort of exemplary handwriting that could be used for helping children learn to write. When I looked closer, though, there was a visibly smudged portion. This was at the start of a sentence, so it looked as though he had made a mistake and then written back over it. *Sending it with that sort of correction suggests he doesn’t mind letting his standards slip. I’m sure Lord Simeon would have started again.*

This felt like a window into the man’s nature. *Those who appear punctilious but actually make clear errors are the most dangerous people of all. That’s my impression, anyway. Apologies, Mr. Mereaux, but we probably won’t be able to tell you the true story of what’s going on until it’s all over.*

“Sasha also told me he and his men would keep an eye out for anyone acting suspiciously. They’ve asked their colleagues on the island to conduct a thorough investigation of the area around Cours port. They’re currently awaiting the findings.”

“That is reassuring. I can’t wait to see if they learn anything. Now there’s only one more problem remaining.” I looked over at the window. Although it was a time of year when the sun didn’t set until rather late, nightfall was approaching rapidly. It would soon be time for dinner. “I wonder if your grandfather’s back yet?”

“The butler said he should be back for dinner, so I imagine he’ll arrive very soon if he hasn’t already.”

After eating between meals, I wasn’t particularly hungry. Despite knowing I should have held back, Lara’s cooking was simply too delicious, so I kept taking more and more.

I’m sure to make a terrible first impression on Lord Simeon’s grandfather if I

can't even eat the food he serves. How did I get myself into this mess?

Clutching my stomach, I murmured to myself, "I wonder if I'll fit more in if I loosen my corset?"

Lord Simeon burst into laughter. "It won't matter if you can't eat a thing."

"Of course it will! He's welcoming me into his home."

"I doubt he'll want an especially large dinner either. Nor is he as difficult to please as you're dreading. It will be fine."

He spoke gently in an effort to ease my worries. Though still dubious, I set about getting ready for dinner. I was still hot and sweaty from the day's exertion, so I washed and changed into a different outfit, and had my hair styled. I dithered for a while about my choice of necklace, wondering if I should wear the diamonds that were, in theory, so fitting for a woman who had married into an earldom. In the end, I felt it would be too ostentatious in front of an elderly gentleman, so I wore pearls instead. This was a simple dinner among family, so it seemed best to opt for simplicity.

Lord Simeon got changed as well, and we made our way to the dining room. There, at last, I came face to face with Lord Simeon's grandfather.

I found myself rather surprised.

"Sorry I'm so late. It would have been quicker if I had sailed around the coast as well, but I had a carriage waiting for me. It's a fairly circuitous route on land."

The one who greeted us was none other than "Gramps," the old man we had met in Sasha's village.

Words failed me. I looked up at my husband, who appeared to be torn between laughter and an apology.

"Lord Simeon, what's going on?" I asked under my breath, my voice a tad more aggressive than I had intended.

Rather flustered, he replied, "I hardly expected to see him there either. It was quite a shock, honestly. Sasha and the other villagers seemed unaware of who he really was, so I quickly decided it was better not to say anything. That did mean I had no opportunity to tell you either. I'm sorry."

Now that I recalled, there had been something slightly off with Lord Simeon's reaction when he first had entered Sasha's house, but he had quickly recovered. I'd assumed he had found it disagreeable to be setting foot in a commoner's home, but in fact he had unexpectedly encountered his own grandfather. *Bravo to the black-hearted military officer! A masterful performance. This is why I have to stay on guard at all times. He never fails to light my fangirl fire!*

That aside, my plan to carefully hide my claws and present a prim and proper front had been skillfully blown to smithereens by a sneak attack.

I can't believe it. I unwittingly behaved in such a disgraceful manner. I was so unabashed in front of Lord Simeon's grandfather! I complained about my husband and bickered with Sasha. Ugh, good heavens, I'll never be able to look him in the face again! I wanted to bury my head in my hands.

But Lord Simeon's grandfather, former navy admiral Donatien Flaubert, laughed loudly. "It's me that should apologize. I never thought the two of you would trek all the way over there. Sorry that I forced you to play along with my little deception."

I couldn't bring myself to respond, but his mirthful face held the same warmth that it had before. Looking into his eyes, I could see no hint of disapproval, nor any scorn or contempt. He had changed into clothes more fitting for a former earl, but the kindness he exuded had not changed one bit.

That's right—he came across as such a lovely man. In no way did I have the impression that he was a sly and malicious person who was deceiving people with an ulterior motive.

I looked back at Lord Donatien with fresh eyes and saw a balanced combination of Lord Simeon's robustness and my father-in-law Earl Maximilian's tenderness. His hair was completely white, but his physique was still as imposing as I had expected. In his eyes the color of the ocean, a slightly deeper hue than Lord Simeon's, there was a strength that bore no relation to his advanced years and a depth that could only have grown with age.

Those oceanic eyes looked back at me fondly. "I'm sorry that our first meeting was under such ridiculous circumstances. Why don't we introduce ourselves again? I'm Donatien Flaubert, the lord of this manor."

“As you command. My name is Marielle. Though I may be inexperienced, with little knowledge of how to be a good wife, I’m prepared to dedicate myself to learning. It’s a pleasure and an honor to make your acquaintance.”

I curtsied, and his laughter rang out once more. “Honestly, there’s no need to stand on ceremony. I know what a cheery and exuberant person you are, and it’s perfectly all right with me. You can bake such delicious bread, too!” He clapped his grandson on the back with a deeply lined hand. “You’ve found an excellent wife.”

Lord Simeon blushed.

The dinner we enjoyed after that was so light that it would be odd to even describe it as “dinner.” I wasn’t the only one who had enjoyed a hearty portion of Lara’s cooking. We finished with this decidedly moderate evening meal in less than an hour and moved on to a relaxed conversation accompanied by coffee and tea.

Lord Donatien explained a little more about his presence in the village. The reason he had become Sasha’s guardian was, as Lara had said, that he had been friends with Sasha’s grandfather. He had decided that Sasha would be happier staying in the village rather than being made to move into the lord’s manor, so he had left the boy’s day-to-day needs in the hands of the locals and occasionally visited to see how he was doing, never revealing his own identity.

He was thinking about telling Sasha the truth once he came of age, but the tough part was determining exactly when that was. “He certainly has the body of a grown man, but I’m not sure I’d describe him as an adult. Still, I shouldn’t leave it too much longer.”

Lord Simeon and I smiled wryly at Lord Donatien’s comment. Admittedly, it felt a little dubious to consider Sasha a grown-up in any sense. That said, he also wasn’t a mere child who would be unable to understand if it were explained to him. I was sure it would be fine to reveal all at some point soon.

Even learning that his guardian was secretly a retired earl wouldn’t make Sasha start putting on airs. He can be a bit of a dunce at times, but he’s a good and honest boy with a strong sense of justice. That must be the effect of being raised in a simple village like that.

On a related note, I couldn't help feeling that Lord Donatien had a very different personality than I had expected. Never in a million years would I have guessed that he had such a playful streak. This was Lord Simeon's grandfather—the one who had taught him, trained him strictly, and raised him to be who he was today. I'd seen the man who had resulted from that, so how could I help assuming that the teacher would be much like the student? If anything, since Lord Donatien was so much older, I had assumed he would be even more stubborn and set in his ways. I had expected to feel intimidated.

Instead, he was jovial and open-hearted. *I suppose he did allow his son to follow an academic path rather than a military one, and it's not as though Lord Simeon's brothers share his personality—one is a little devil and the other is an energetic character full of adoration for his older brother. It's generally quite an easygoing family, so it stands to reason that they inherited that from the former earl.*

Why, then, was Lord Simeon the only exception? Was it simply the innate disposition he'd been born with?

Unable to remain silent, I asked this question. Lord Donatien's face took on an uneasy expression. "Ah yes. I'm afraid I may have blundered."

"Blundered?" I replied, looking over at Lord Simeon. *In what sense?*

Lord Simeon himself also furrowed his brows quizzically. "What are you suggesting, Grandfather? Is there something wrong with me?"

"Oh no, that's not what I mean." Despite this denial, however, his tone still hinted at very mixed feelings. "You see, Simeon has been a very handsome lad ever since he was born. Many people say he looks like his mother, but actually, the one he resembles most of all is my wife. Simeon probably doesn't remember her—she died before he turned three—but she was a famous beauty in her day. As he grew up, he began to resemble her more and more. On top of that, he was clever. Remarkably clever. Even when he was still an infant who could barely form words, it was clear how quickly the cogs were turning in his mind. He was so good at everything that it actually made me and his parents start to worry."

He's been handsome and clever ever since he was born, but they found that

worrying? What's all this about?

He noticed my confusion. "Consider this: if he was blessed like that all the way from birth, and everyone praised him and told him how special he was, there was every chance of him growing up into an unbearable excuse for a man. We knew that if we didn't raise him just right, he'd become arrogant and self-important. He'd never learn to put in effort to achieve anything and would waste all the advantages he'd been born with."

I couldn't deny it. Perhaps he wouldn't have become too unpleasantly arrogant, but there was every chance he'd have been somewhat conceited and vain. He was the heir to an earldom, which came with enough wealth and prestige to cause him to be bathed in admiration. Being such an outstanding child would only compound that. Raising him to have a sense of humility sounded like quite a challenge.

"As his natural strengths grew ever more pronounced, I was determined to find a way to educate him that would ensure he remained humble, dedicated, and considerate. I decided to be strict and do everything I could to avoid pampering him. Perhaps, though, I should have applied a lighter touch."

"What do you mean?"

Lord Donatien laughed awkwardly. "By the time I realized I'd gone a little too far, his character was already set in stone. He was a fully formed man, and this was the man he was."

I looked at Lord Simeon and silently nodded. I understood completely. *His serious personality probably came from some intrinsic aspect of him as well, so if he was raised with a firm hand, no doubt he absorbed every bit of that and this was the result.*

Hearing the truth for the first time at age twenty-seven, Lord Simeon looked rather pained. "It's a tad late to be telling me this now."

Honestly, why even worry? I love you BECAUSE you're like this, Lord Simeon! If you'd been raised into an arrogant snob, I doubt you'd have even noticed me. It's only because you're who you are that we met and fell in love. I'm grateful to how your grandfather raised you. He didn't blunder at all.

Lord Donatien said, “He can be infuriatingly stuffy at times, but I hope you’ll take good care of him. In exchange, I can guarantee that you don’t need to worry about him dallying with other women or spending money frivolously. A serious approach is the best thing for a marriage. I’m sure you’ll build a strong household together.”

He was speaking neither as the former earl nor as the former admiral, but as an ordinary grandfather. Naturally, I responded to these warm words with enthusiastic agreement.

With that, my most pressing mission was successfully completed. This did leave another major topic remaining, of course. We reported everything about that to him and began arranging measures to deal with the situation. With Sasha working hard on it as well, I was confident that everything would be fine.

Chapter Nine

Though the smuggling investigation continued, there were no new developments for now. While we were waiting to receive new information, we decided to make a start on seeing the sights of Enciel Island.

Thus, the day after our arrival, Lord Simeon and I left the manor together and again walked toward Cours port. There were a number of hotels in the surrounding urban area, and many shops aimed at tourists, each teeming with local specialties.

While choosing souvenirs for my family and friends, I found a charming parasol and asked Lord Simeon to buy that for me as well.

I wonder what happened to the parasol I lost on board the Decoration? I asked the crew to look for it, but they never found it. Perhaps it fell into the sea—or maybe someone else picked it up and kept it. I hope someone's getting some use out of it, at least. It would be a shame if it just sank into the depths.

We were surrounded by tourists just like us. Well-dressed ladies and gentlemen were browsing the shops and enjoying a morning of shopping. With all these wealthy people around us, it felt a lot like Sans-Terre. Whenever it felt too familiar, all I had to do was look up at the sky. A bright and carefree world enveloped us that was entirely different from the capital.

We were left with quite a lot to carry after buying so many things, so Lord Simeon went to get a carriage, taking it all with him. As I waited, I browsed the nearby stalls. Though some of them sold souvenirs, others sold food and drink to be eaten on the spot. Even nobles could be seen forgetting about manners for a while and experiencing the local street food.

I'd love to buy something delicious and sit on a bench with Lord Simeon while we eat. After coming all this way, I have to be daring and eat some things I've never tried before. Seafood skewers appeared to be a perfect choice, but then the sweets at the next stall caught my eye. How darling! They've covered little apples in toffee! And what about that brightly colored rope they're selling—is

that something sweet as well?

I flitted about between the different stalls, torn this way and that by all the tasty-looking treats. Suddenly I noticed a man and woman a short distance away. “Oh!”

The woman’s ostentatious hairstyle and dress drew the eye first of all. It was Alice, accompanied of course by Lionel. This was the first time I had seen them since arriving on the island. Presumably they were staying at a hotel, since they hadn’t come to the lord’s manor at all.

It appeared they were out shopping, just like us, but Lionel did not look especially interested. Alice tried tugging on his sleeve several times to try and draw his attention to places that caught her interest. Then she said something and he immediately turned and left, ignoring her sullen pleas.

Left on her own, Alice squared her shoulders and walked in the opposite direction—toward me.

I really don’t understand their relationship. They’re too close to be friends, but if they’re lovers, Lionel certainly doesn’t show it. They’ve come all this way to a beautiful paradise and he doesn’t even want to spend any time with her. What on earth can he be thinking?

I couldn’t help feeling somewhat sorry for Alice. If Lionel disapproved so strongly of shopping, he could at least have suggested some other activity for them to enjoy together.

Alice’s ill-tempered face was drawing closer. As ever, she failed to notice me at all. I considered simply pretending I hadn’t seen her and focusing on the stalls again, but as she passed by, I changed my mind. “Alice!”

She turned around with a startled expression. When she noticed who had flagged her down, she was taken aback for a moment but quickly regained her usual grimace.

“Good day,” I said, pretending that I hadn’t even seen her being so rudely abandoned by Lionel. “I see you’re here shopping as well.”

Alice looked me up and down and snorted. “On your own today, are you? Has your husband dumped you already?”

“Not at all, he’s just—”

“I suppose he wouldn’t want to be seen with a woman as ugly as you. Surely you realize those clothes don’t suit you at all? Do you think just covering yourself in expensive apparel will improve your appearance? How idiotic. It’s just a waste of good clothes. It’s shameful, wearing clothes that are so much better than you deserve. You should know better. Look at you! Carrying a parasol as if you care about getting sunburned! Utterly laughable.”

Her words came at an impressively rapid pace. Given what had just happened to her, I was certain she was simply taking her anger out on me, but I hadn’t expected her to go so far. I found it so interesting how different her insults were compared to those of the noblewomen I was used to. This wasn’t a suitable moment to get out my notebook, so I made a mental note instead. *I’ll have to be sure to write it all down later before I forget.*

Her rant continued. “He must have been forced into marrying you. Marriages between nobles are always about joining the families together, aren’t they? If he has to suffer through an arranged marriage, they could at least have found him a prettier woman. I bet it’s torture for him to be with an ugly cow who thinks she can fix it all with a few fancy outfits. No wonder he’s run off without you.”

I had the impression that if I stayed quiet and let her monopolize the conversation, she would soon leave. Eager to avoid this, I forcibly changed the subject even though it meant the conversation flowed somewhat unnaturally. “Ohoho, I suppose. Incidentally, where are you and Lionel staying?”

Rather than giving a friendly answer, Alice glared even more critically. “What? Why even ask? What does it have to do with you?”

I chose my words carefully. “I expected to see you at the lord’s manor, but you don’t appear to be staying there. The lord himself—my husband’s grandfather—was also rather concerned.”

That much was true. Upon hearing that Lionel had come to the island, Lord Donatien had looked quite troubled. There seemed to be more to his worries than simply a wish to see Lionel before he left again. Perhaps he knew about Lionel’s recent tendency to fly into a rage.

We hadn't discussed it much further since Lord Simeon and his grandfather had both assumed he would simply be staying at the Azema Hotel, in which the Duchesnay family was an investor. They mentioned that it might be worth going there to see how he was, but I was still wondering if we couldn't invite him to the manor instead.

I can't honestly say that I have much love for Lionel, but he is related to Lord Simeon, so we should try to maintain an amicable relationship with him if possible. It's not as though we can break all ties with him in any case, since House Flaubert has a business relationship with House Duchesnay. Being on bad terms with the future head of the Duchesnay family would be a very unwise prospect. This coincidental trip to the same island is a golden opportunity to bury the hatchet.

I continued, "I'm wondering if Lionel said anything."

Ideally I wanted Alice's help in this endeavor, but I couldn't rush things, especially before discussing it with Lord Simeon. For now, all I wanted to do was find out more about her and Lionel's current situation.

Alice did nothing in response but eye me with suspicion. *Maybe I'm expecting too much too soon. She's not willing to talk to me on friendly terms yet. Hmm, I need some sort of plan. How can I win Alice to my cause?*

I maintained an insincere smile as my mind whirled. When I opened my mouth ready to speak again, a voice came from nearby.

"Oh, are you out on a shopping trip?"

I hadn't sensed anyone approaching, so I jumped in surprise. I whipped my head around and saw a slender man standing close by. His unusual silvery gray hair and narrow eyes were unmistakable. "Mr. Mereaux, I didn't see you there."

It was the head of the local branch of the Duchesnay Shipping Company. I had met him for the first time just yesterday. Under one arm he held a bag with some bread poking out of it; evidently he was here for a similar purpose as we were.

He grinned and gave me a bow, then looked back and forth between me and Alice. "Good day. I must say, this is an unexpected combination of people."

Is that right? That must mean he knows Alice.

“Good day to you,” I replied. “That bread looks scrumptious.”

He laughed. “Well, I am a poor lonely singleton. I came here to buy some lunch.”

Today, too, he was dressed with style. He wasn’t wearing a jacket, and his shirt, again made of cool material, had decorative bands around the sleeves. The back of his waistcoat was a different color than the front, and instead of a cravat he wore a knotted string. As an accent piece, he nonchalantly wore a high-class cameo.

I wouldn’t have described him as overly handsome, but from his hairstyle down to his shoes, he was perfectly polished. That this came across as natural rather than affected was all the more noteworthy.

When people talk of a fashionable man, this is what they mean. Lord Simeon could probably learn a thing or two from him. In his royal guard’s uniform he may be too dashing for words, but he does lose some of that impact when in his civilian clothes.

When choosing his attire, Lord Simeon prioritized practicality above all else, so often his clothes were rather plain. The man himself was so dashing that it made little difference, but if he dressed as dapperly as Mr. Mereaux, I was certain it would enhance his looks to an intense degree. *I’m quite certain I would die over and over again! You’ll have to prepare my tombstone already, it’s that much of a certainty! Don’t try to tell me I’m holding you to a different standard than I hold myself! Fashion has a completely different effect on you!*

A proper wife has to pay attention to that sort of thing. I decided that when we were back in Sans-Terre I would consult with my mother-in-law.

While my mind wandered in all sorts of different directions, Mr. Mereaux’s attention was drawn to Alice. He spoke to her in a very familiar tone indeed. “I hear you’ve come here with Lionel this time? The two of you kept that rather secret. If you don’t send word in advance that you’re coming, I can’t be there to greet you upon your arrival. In fact, until I heard about it from this lady and her husband, I didn’t know either of you were here. How cold.”

He wore a cheerful smile as he said this, but for some reason Alice shrank back and did not say a word in return. She avoided his gaze and seemed to be glancing around nervously. *Hmm, how odd.*

Mr. Mereaux asked another question. "Where is Lionel? I don't see him with you."

Seeming as though her personality had undergone a complete reversal since her spirited attack on my appearance, Alice answered in a reluctant murmur, "He was here until a minute ago. He said he was sick of shopping so he wanted to go for a walk."

Mr. Mereaux tutted jestingly. "Abandoning the young lady he's supposed to be escorting? What a naughty boy."

His lighthearted manner suggested he didn't particularly care what she thought of him. He was showing no regard for her feelings. This impression was only confirmed by his next remark.

"Not that your own behavior speaks especially well of you either. First Raoul and now Lionel. Isn't that a tiny bit too brazen? Shouldn't you have more regard for appearances?"

His cheery tone was dripping with poison. More than a hint of disapproval showed through his mild expression.

He continued, "It's barely been a year since then. You can't have cared about him all that much if your feelings can change so quickly."

Not only did Alice not respond, she didn't even look angry. She avoided his gaze as if she wanted absolutely nothing to do with him.

"I'm going," she said at last, muttering so vaguely that it wasn't even clear who she meant to address. Then she turned around and darted away too quickly for us to stop her. Watching her disappear into the throngs of tourists, Mr. Mereaux uttered a sarcastic laugh.

I stood stock still, wondering what to do about this uncomfortable situation, but he turned to me and apologized. "I'm terribly sorry that you had to witness such ugly business."

“That’s quite all right,” I said politely.

“I’m sure you were surprised by the directness of my phrasing, but she’s the sort of person who will never understand any other approach.” He sighed, looking somewhat perturbed.

He had come across as such a soft-spoken person before, so it was rather unexpected for him to be so openly critical. “I can tell that you’ve known her for quite a while. If you don’t mind me asking, who is that Raoul you mentioned?”

I did fear he’d find it rude for me to ask, but my curiosity had gotten the better of me. Besides, he had been so forward in mentioning Alice’s history in front of me to begin with.

“Lionel’s younger brother. He unfortunately passed away last year.”

“Oh, I heard about that. An accident, wasn’t it?”

Mr. Mereaux nodded. “Indeed. A most tragic one. The wind was particularly strong that day, so it must have pushed him too far. Poor lad.”

It was clear that he knew a great deal about the circumstances surrounding the accident. Having not expected this, I hurriedly pressed for more. “Oh dear, that does sound awful. I actually haven’t heard much about it, to be honest. Did he die on this island?”

He looked back at me with some surprise on his face as well. Seemingly he had assumed I knew all about it. “Yes, that’s right. It was at the end of May, exactly one year ago. He visited the island with Miss Alice, never to return home.”

So when Raoul died, he and Alice were visiting the island together, most likely as lovers. Now, a year later, she’s come here again, this time with Raoul’s older brother, Lionel.

I could see why Mr. Mereaux didn’t approve. From an outside perspective, it was far from commendable. Not only had she begun to pursue the brother of her deceased suitor, but one year later she had come to the very same island where he died, ostensibly for a pleasant vacation. If there was really no more to it than that, it was scandalous behavior.

“What sort of accident was it?” I asked.

“He fell from a cliff. A rather precipitous one on the other side of the island.”

He pointed, and I had a fairly good idea of what lay in the direction his finger led. On the boat ride to Sasha’s village I had seen some dizzyingly high cliffs, one of which had stood out in particular. “Was it a cliff facing directly out to sea, with sharp rocks underneath?”

“That’s the one. There are signs that warn against getting too close, but the danger is exactly why youngsters like to go there. Accidents happen sometimes, and murders, too. Raoul should have been well aware of the risks, but maybe he was so used to the island that he grew overconfident.” He shook his head mournfully. “It was unbearable seeing the grief-stricken faces of his family—especially his mother. She doted on him because he was the youngest child. He adored traveling and always said he wanted to study abroad like his older brother, but his mother hated the idea and wouldn’t allow it. Such a charming boy, so honest and trusting. That’s why he was taken in by a woman like that.”

His solemn tone lost all its warmth at the end. He was being awfully blatant. Phrasing my thoughts rather mildly, I said, “Mr. Mereaux, you seem to have a rather negative view of Alice.”

He took on a look of slight embarrassment. “I’m aware that I’m being a little harsh. She’s still young and perhaps deserves more of a chance. And yet, I’m afraid I just can’t find any way to like her.” This opinion seemed not to stem from this latest visit, but rather was one he had held for a long time. Making no effort to hide his displeasure, he continued, “It might not have been obvious to someone with a pampered upbringing like Raoul’s, but she was definitely only after his fortune. Going after his older brother now that he’s passed away is utterly shameless.”

The details began to click together in my mind. *Yes, I see what’s going on.* I believed I finally had an explanation for Lionel and Alice’s strange relationship. “From what I’ve seen, Lionel doesn’t have any interest in Alice at all. He also said they were friends, not lovers. It’s possible she has some expectation that their relationship will develop into a romantic one, but I expect the reason they’ve come to the island now is to visit Raoul’s grave.”

Why else would a pair like that visit a place full of sad memories exactly one year after the tragedy? I could think of no other reason.

“Is Raoul’s grave on this island?” I asked.

Mr. Mereaux stared in surprise, but did confirm my suspicion. “Yes. His mother wanted to bring the body home, but her husband insisted it was better to bury him here. The alternative would have been even more upsetting.”

This was entirely reasonable. Even going at full speed on the fastest ship in existence, it would take an entire day to travel between Enciel Island and Sans-Terre. A normal passenger ship would take more than twice that. After the time needed for the family to receive word of Raoul’s passing and then reach the island, taking the body back to Sans-Terre would have been unrealistic at this time of year. There would have been no choice but to hold the funeral on Enciel and bury him here.

“If you’re right,” said Mr. Mereaux, “I’d still expect them to act with more decorum. It sounded as though they were enjoying a casual shopping jaunt like any other tourists.”

“I am only guessing. I haven’t heard them say anything along those lines. Still, even if they came here with a solemn purpose in mind, fixating on such a dreadful matter for their entire stay wouldn’t be healthy. Maybe Alice was trying to cheer Lionel up. He has been in such a bad mood, presumably because of his grief over his brother.”

My theory made Mr. Mereaux fall silent for a moment. *Does he think I’m foolishly optimistic? I can imagine my opinion doesn’t hold much weight for him.* In the end, I was a third party who had never known the deceased and had no direct involvement with the current circumstances.

I decided it was better not to push the matter too far. What was the use of arguing with him about this? “My apologies. I spoke out of turn.”

He hurriedly shook his head. “Oh, don’t worry, you have nothing to apologize for. I’ll admit my view of the matter is clouded by emotion. It could be just as you say.”

Now he smiled again as he spoke, letting the subject drop in a very mature

manner, but some degree of awkwardness still hung in the air. While I was considering what to say next, Lord Simeon returned. Seeing a man by my side, he ran over at a fevered pace, even though he must have realized straight away that it was just Mr. Mereaux.

“No need to hurry,” I said when he reached my side.

“I just didn’t want to keep you waiting any longer. Apologies, I happened upon an acquaintance of mine.”

“Oh, really? Who was it?”

“Lord Cesar. He’s visiting with his wife as well.” He turned to Mr. Mereaux. “Good day to you. Do you not have to work today?”

In a courteous tone, Mr. Mereaux replied, “Good day, Lord Simeon. I stepped out to buy something for lunch. It seemed only polite to say hello to your wife when I happened upon her.”

Though he’d been relatively informal with me, Lord Simeon’s arrival had made him more formal again. He put his hand on his chest just as he had yesterday, though this came across as rather odd when his other hand was holding a bag with bread poking out of it. He noticed my gaze and, with an awkward smile, adjusted how he was holding it. In the process, his shirt sleeve slid up and revealed his slender wrist. That, too, showed signs of his individual sense of style, as he wore an onyx bracelet. *I wonder if onyx is some sort of good luck charm for him?*

“Regarding the matter we discussed yesterday, I’m afraid I don’t yet have any information worthy of reporting. The investigation is still underway.”

“Thank you. I realize I’m adding to your workload, but I truly appreciate it.”

“Oh, not at all. It happened on board one of our ships, so I can’t act as though it’s none of my concern. I’ll do my utmost to find some sort of a lead.”

Neither he nor I mentioned Alice at all, and the topic moved on to the island’s best sightseeing destinations. The awkwardness dissipated with Lord Simeon there, which was no doubt as much of a relief to Mr. Mereaux as it was to me.

He told us about a place he recommended visiting. “Neel, a village to the west

of here, is holding a festival right now. It's in honor of a saint who lived long ago, with a delightful atmosphere and some very unusual food. I think you'd enjoy it very much."

"That does sound like good fun," I replied. "Were you born on this island, Mr. Mereaux?"

"No, I'm originally from Sans-Terre."

"Oh, I see. You know so many things that I thought you might be a local."

"I have been here for rather a long time now. Perhaps that means I can stay forever." He laughed as he said this. I wasn't sure if he meant it seriously or as a joke. The island certainly held enough appeal to justify wanting to live here permanently.

A thought popped into my head. "Oh, I have a question for you. Is there anywhere on the island that I can get books from Orta?"

He appeared somewhat mystified. "From Orta, was that?"

"Yes. Novels written there. Romance novels, if possible."

He put a hand to his chin and mused over this. "Hmm, I wonder. There are plenty of bookstores, but I'm not sure any of them have Ortan books. I suspect your chances would be much higher if you went to the country itself."

"Should I abandon all hope of finding any here?"

"That may be necessary, I'm afraid. I certainly don't recall seeing any."

What a shame. I was left slightly dejected. Lord Simeon shot a warning at me with his eyes. *Don't worry, I won't say anything imprudent.*

"Why Ortan books in particular?" asked Mr. Mereaux.

"As you might have guessed from my glasses, I've always been a bookworm."

"I see."

"My interest extends beyond Lagrangian books. I want to read stories from every country I can. I have books from Easdale, Lavia, and more, but getting my hands on books from Orta has proven rather more difficult."

"I can imagine so. Trade with Orta is restricted in various ways, so there can't

be too many of their books making their way over.”

“Exactly. The one book I’ve managed to obtain was about the local customs and beliefs, which are interesting to read about, but what I’m really looking for are novels! Love stories! They surely must have those in Orta as well!”

“Yes, I suppose so.” My impassioned speech left him looking rather nonplussed. *I know if I’d said that to a fellow book lover they’d have sympathized!*

“This island is so close to Orta, after all. I thought I might have some luck here, but apparently not.” My shoulders sank.

Mr. Mereaux smiled and offered some consolation. “What if I were to order some and have them sent to you? It might take a while, but I can definitely manage it.”

My face lit up. “Thank you so much! We’ll pay all the costs, of course.”

“You do realize they’ll be in the original language, though? I doubt there are any translations available.”

I fully accepted that. I nodded and said, “That’s quite all right. Their language is similar to ours, so I can read it if I keep a dictionary on hand. I’ve read books from Linden and Vissel that way.”

“My, that is impressive. Your proficiency in languages does you credit as the wife of a future earl.”

“No, honestly, they really are very similar. The grammar is almost identical, and the vocabulary is close enough that it’s not much of a struggle. Ortan’s use of punctuation is slightly idiosyncratic, which confused me at first, but—”

I stopped mid-sentence. A thought suddenly floated up in my mind but I couldn’t quite pin it down. *What was that? I almost remembered something. Was it something to do with the Ortan language?*

Lord Simeon took this brief lull in the conversation as an opportunity to jump in. “Marielle, we should be getting on our way soon. We mustn’t keep Mr. Mereaux for too long during his lunch break.”

The fragment of a memory disappeared before I could grasp it. All my

awareness returned to the people standing before me.

“Yes, that’s true. Apologies, Mr. Mereaux. I got so lost in conversation.”

“That’s quite all right. It wouldn’t do to show you all this attention in front of your husband.” He looked at Lord Simeon playfully.

Lord Simeon, who struggled to deal with such jesting remarks, cleared his throat in an attempt to conceal his discomfort.

Still smiling, Mr. Mereaux said, “I do hope you both enjoy the rest of your stay. If you’ll excuse me.” With that, he disappeared into the crowds.

We quickly moved on as well. After a little more window-shopping, we entered a restaurant that Lord Simeon particularly recommended. It was quickly filling up with fellow tourists ordering lunch, but luckily we arrived in time to find a free table.

Once we had finished ordering, I decided to give voice to the question that had been on my mind since he pointedly interrupted my conversation with Mr. Mereaux. I looked around. All the other patrons looked like ordinary tourists to me. Even so, I lowered my voice just to be on the safe side.

“Did I say something wrong? Should I have avoided mentioning Orta at all?”

While keeping a nonchalant expression, he spoke in a very quiet voice as well. “There wasn’t really anything wrong with what you said, but it would be better to avoid bringing up Orta if at all possible. If we show too much interest in Orta, it might stand out. We don’t know who might be listening.”

“I see what you mean. I do apologize. I really did just want Ortan novels, though.” *I wasn’t trying to surreptitiously investigate.*

My effort to justify myself made Lord Simeon smile bitterly with a hint of disbelief. “Your love of books surpasses my expectations. I knew you had read a great variety, but I’d never have guessed your collection extended to Ortan.”

“Only a single book, and it wasn’t even a novel. I’ve searched high and low without any success. I wish it were easier to get hold of books from foreign countries.”

“In the end, the only ones who purchase books are those with financial

means. An interest in foreign books goes a step further. It requires not only money, but language skills. With such low demand, there's little incentive for suppliers."

It was entirely as he said. Though my desire to read books in foreign languages was so close to my heart that I never questioned it, from a societal point of view, they were a very specific type of luxury item. Hardly anyone imported books from faraway countries unless they were an academic.

While we were waiting for our meal to arrive, Lord Simeon murmured almost to himself, "I suppose books bring you more joy than jewelry."

I had been distracted, but I looked at him again. "What was that?"

"If you wanted them, you could have asked me. You've never asked me to buy you any jewels, but surely books are something you'd feel comfortable asking for?"

Oh my, this is interesting. The faintly sulking tone in his voice made me want to smile, but I held myself back. *Did Mr. Mereaux hit the nail on the head with his teasing comment?*

"It's not that I was reluctant to ask," I replied. "Where books are concerned, I'm in the habit of searching on my own, that's all. The jewels and clothes you've given me have made me very happy as well. You've bought me all sorts of fine things that I'd never have been able to afford otherwise. I'm incredibly grateful."

"Is that so?" he replied curtly. It seemed my answer had not satisfied him. Once, when he was inebriated, he had confessed that he didn't know how to make me happy. He'd said that all he could think of were "ordinary" things. Despite how unnecessary this worry seemed from my point of view, for him it was clearly a serious concern. *It's so silly, but it makes me love him so much. That alone makes me so happy I can hardly bear it!*

"But there's something—someone—that thrills me even more than books and jewels...that makes me forget about everything else. If I were to ask you to give me anything, it wouldn't be physical goods, but time. The more time we can spend together like this, the happier I'll be."

There's nothing I want more than you. I didn't use those exact words, but I'm sure he realized what I was getting at.

His frown softened. He blushed but looked somewhat troubled. "Another difficult request."

Time with him was even more precious than jewels. I understood the position he was in. "I don't mean to make any unrealistic demands, but that's what I wish for most of all. I hope you'll remember."

I wanted to emphasize this point to my husband, who tended to be far more engrossed in his work than was necessary. He needed to relax sometimes, not only for my sake, but because working too hard could affect his health.

At this moment, however, I was happy. I was enjoying my time with him. Lord Simeon didn't really say anything in return, but I was certain I'd expressed my feelings clearly enough. Based on the way he self-consciously looked away and pursed his lips, not to mention his restless fingertips and subtly reddened cheeks, I could tell what he was thinking.

Heavens above, he is CUTE! I wish I could pound on the table and scream about how hard I'm fangirling over him right now. Engaged or married, I will never, ever lose interest in him. He's wonderful, dashing, and adorable every single day of his life. The joy I find in him each day could easily make me collapse under the sheer weight of my fangirl obsession!

Though I was in a sense of turmoil underneath the surface, for the sake of my husband I did my best to maintain my poise, keeping a straitlaced expression as if I had not noticed his behavior at all.

Chapter Ten

After lunch, we changed our plans slightly. The new destination we decided upon was one that would not be overly populated: the very seaside cliff where Raoul had lost his life. After I reported to Lord Simeon all that I gleaned from meeting Alice and discussing the accident with Mr. Mereaux, the conversation ultimately led to a point where I strongly desired to go there.

At first I had suggested we could invite Lionel to the manor, but Lord Simeon was not entirely receptive to this idea.

“Even if we did invite him, I doubt he would come. I imagine the very reason he’s staying in a hotel is that he’d rather not see me.”

“If you realize that but you also continue to push him away, the gap between you will only grow wider. You’re both adults, so can’t you move past the mindset you had when you were children and try to get along? That requires meeting him in the middle, but you have to put in the effort first.”

His face grew troubled. “It would be nice if that were possible, but I fear his view of me has become far worse than it was the last time I saw him. I wouldn’t say we ever got on especially well, but he never disliked me so intensely. He didn’t enjoy spending time in my company, but he never expressed such hatred. It’s bewildering, quite frankly.”

So his current attitude toward Lord Simeon is a new development. I tilted my head and considered this for a moment. “Perhaps this is also because of what happened to his brother. The accident took place in House Flaubert’s territory, so maybe he thinks that your family should have stopped him from doing something so dangerous, or else put some precautions in place.”

“That would be an unreasonable view indeed. Raoul should have known full well how dangerous that cliff was. He had visited the island repeatedly since his boyhood and been warned many times.”

“Even so...”

Knowing that such a view was unreasonable wouldn't necessarily keep him from bearing a grudge. Humans are not always rational creatures.

"My grandfather was terribly upset by the accident. Afterwards, he put up a fence to prevent anyone else from getting so close to the edge. It's true that he should have done so earlier, but I can hardly blame him. Anyone can see how dangerous it is, and anyone truly determined to go right to the edge would simply climb over the fence regardless."

He phrased this so bluntly that it almost seemed cold. If Lionel had heard him, I've no doubt he would have flown into a rage. Knowing Lord Simeon, however, he certainly didn't mean it dismissively. Just as he cared deeply about his subordinates, he was no doubt filled with consideration for his younger relatives as well. He had phrased it this way to express that there was more to this matter than feelings alone.

If he and his family accepted blame undeservedly, it would stain their reputation. In a situation where House Flaubert had clearly been at fault it would have been impossible for them to deny it, but as far as anyone knew, the cause of Raoul's death was his own recklessness. He should never have stepped so close to the edge regardless of whether there was a fence or not. He wasn't a small child who needed someone else to force him to be careful.

Blaming the deceased for his own death feels awfully uncomfortable, though.

It was a sad and unfortunate situation no matter how one looked at it, and reflecting on it was rather painful. I decided to change my approach and think about what I could do in the present. Thus it occurred to me that visiting the scene of the accident might be appropriate.

"Why don't we go there and lay some flowers on the cliff? We can put all this business of blame and responsibility to one side and simply say a prayer for Raoul. It seems a shame not to when we're so close by."

His face clouded over slightly, but he didn't oppose the idea. "You raise a good point. I had intended to visit his grave in any case, but this is the first time I've come to the island since the accident, so we should probably visit the site itself while we're here."

I knew he cared. I imagine he must be mourning Raoul as well.

My smile may have come too soon. “But,” he added, “as I’ve said many times, it’s highly dangerous, so we can only look at it from a distance. You absolutely must not go anywhere even remotely close to the cliff edge. If you start moving nearer when I’ve told you to stop, I’ll lock you in your room until we go home.”

“All right,” I replied nervously. “I promise.”

He wore such a serious expression that I was shaken. Naturally, I had no intention of running wild in such a dangerous place, but rather than defending myself, it seemed better to obediently agree.

We left the restaurant and bought a bouquet of flowers from a stall, then made our way to the waiting carriage. After a ride on rough roads that took us out of the urban area and through the landscape beyond, we arrived at a quiet and desolate place with almost no buildings anywhere in sight.

The cliff could only be reached by a narrow path, so we asked the driver to stop the carriage. When we got out, we saw an open carriage parked nearby. I had seen many just like it since arriving; it was the type used for sightseeing journeys. Had some other tourists come to visit the cliff?

Before I could say a word, Lord Simeon walked over and spoke to the driver. After a brief chat, he came back with a concerned look on his face.

“I take it the passengers from that carriage have gone up to the cliff?” I asked.

“Yes. A young man and woman, apparently.”

Ugh, how horribly irresponsible. Why come to a place that’s seen so many accidents? “I suppose it’s just as Mr. Mereaux said. Hearing about the danger only makes it more appealing.”

“You’re not the only one with such a strong sense of curiosity.”

“Indeed,” I said, agreeing by accident before realizing what he had said. *Hold on just one moment! I didn’t come here out of idle curiosity!* “If you’re implying —”

He interrupted my cry of protest. “The workers here know better than to cater to such impulsive demands, however. That driver informed me that he refused to take them here at first, but he changed his mind when they said they

weren't coming here for sightseeing purposes, but to lay commemorative flowers on the cliff."

This was not what I had expected to hear. "They came here with the same intention as us?"

"It seems so. And, based on the driver's cursory description, I feel very confident in my guess as to who they are."

"Of course." *A young man and woman who had come to lay flowers... Who else could it be?*

Lord Simeon looked toward the path and I did the same. It unfolded before us, reaching through the woods by the ocean.

"If we go there now, we'll run into them," I pointed out.

"I don't mind too terribly, but it might prove awkward."

We stood there in a moment of indecision. *Perhaps these aren't the ideal circumstances under which to see Lionel again, but it's not as though we're doing anything wrong, so why avoid it? We're here to lay flowers for a deceased relative, just as he is. There is a risk of him growing angry again, but I like to think he wouldn't object to us saying a prayer for his brother.*

"Perhaps we should see it as fate bringing us together," I suggested. "It might even turn into an opportunity to invite him to the manor."

"I fear that may be wishful thinking, but we shall see."

Despite his skepticism, he agreed that we should proceed with our visit. We asked our driver to wait and then set off along the path.

Lord Simeon once again had to provide some assistance to me as we walked up the steep path. The parasol started to get in the way, so I closed it and held it down by my side. *If the ladies of the royal court saw me huffing and puffing like this, they'd laugh at me.*

Though I was thoroughly out of breath, I somehow reached the crest of the hill. The path evened out before us, and though we still couldn't see the ocean through the trees yet, I could tell we were not far from the cliff. A breeze carrying the scent of salt water blew through the leaves. We also passed the

warning sign that Mr. Mereaux had mentioned.

There were voices, too—another sign that we were almost there. Worryingly, though, Lionel and Alice’s voices were raised and sounded fraught. “Are they arguing?”

I stopped in place and tried to listen. Lord Simeon did the same, but mere moments later his expression turned grave and he took a step forward.

“What’s wrong?”

“Wait here.” He rushed ahead without even a look back at me.

Him telling me to stay put was all well and good, but naturally I was intrigued. Lord Simeon only behaved like that when there was trouble brewing. *Has something happened to Lionel and Alice?*

I quickly followed after him. I hadn’t forgotten about the promise I’d made about avoiding danger. Intending only to go far enough that I could tell what was going on, I started running—then quickly stopped when the path opened up into a wide open space before me. The woods gave way to an unbounded view of the sea and sky. My hair flew wildly as the wind hit me head-on. The park-like area, largely free of any undergrowth, extended some distance before tapering to a point and disappearing.

At the edge, Lionel and Alice were engaged in an altercation.

“No, stop it! Let me go!”

As Alice protested and tried to get away from him, he grabbed her and pulled her back. They had gone far beyond the fence, which was made of crisscrossing planks of wood and rose up to roughly chest height for an adult.

I froze, my breath caught in my throat. Lionel took hold of Alice’s head and held it over the edge.

“Look!” he bellowed. “This is where Raoul died! He fell all the way down from here! Well!? How does it feel!? Do you understand how afraid he was!?” His tone was so aggressive that I believed he might really be intending to drop her.

“No! Please!” she yelled, obviously fearing for her life, her hair a disheveled mess. “Stop! Somebody help me! Noooooo!”

Amid her cries, Lord Simeon ran toward the pair. He put one hand on top of the fence and jumped over it in a flash. Before I knew it he had closed the distance.

He grabbed onto both of them and pulled them back to a slightly safer point. Lionel was shocked for a moment, so Lord Simeon used that opening to tear Alice out of his grasp and put himself between the two of them.

When he realized who the sudden interloper was, Lionel's anger flared up. "Simeon, you rat bastard! So you and the wench were working together after all!"

"Try to calm down, Lionel. What are you doing here? You must realize how dangerous it is."

Keeping Alice safely behind him, Lord Simeon slowly moved backwards. *It would be too dangerous to fight here. If he lost his footing even for a second, he would fall.* My blood ran cold. Even though he was standing on solid ground, the risks were extreme, and Lionel seemed ready to fly into a frenzy. It was terrifying to imagine what might happen if Lord Simeon couldn't pacify him.

"If there are circumstances I'm unaware of, I'll gladly listen to you. Let's go back down the hill. Surely you don't mean to share your brother's fate?"

"How *dare* you! What gives *you* the right to say such a thing!? You're the ones who killed him! You pushed Raoul off this cliff!"

This outburst left me stunned. I began to think that Lionel might truly have lost his mind.

Lord Simeon, too, seemed entirely confused. "What was that?"

Lionel pointed toward Alice, who was trembling behind Lord Simeon. "She killed Raoul! At your family's orders!"



“What the devil are you talking about?”

Lord Simeon turned his head to look at Alice, who shook her head fervently.

“It’s not true! I don’t know anything about it! I didn’t do anything!”

“Don’t try to deny it!” roared Lionel. “It’s impossible that Raoul came here alone. You must have brought him here.”

“No! I didn’t!”

“Did you just watch as he fell, or were you the one who pushed him?”

“No! You’ve got it all wrong! I didn’t do anything!”

Alice turned around and ran. She jumped up against the fence and scrambled over it, not even caring that her legs were showing.

“Wait!” barked Lionel, trying to run after her, but Lord Simeon grabbed his arms to stop him, in the process managing to drag him back to a place of relative safety. They were still on the other side of the fence, but they were far enough away from the edge that there was no longer such an imminent risk of falling.

Though I’d expected her to have trouble climbing in her dress, Alice made it over the fence surprisingly quickly and ran off. I didn’t even register in her eyes as she ran down the path, scared and desperate, and disappeared beyond the trees.

For a moment I considered running after her, but I was more worried about Lionel. Absent any instructions from Lord Simeon, I decided there would be plenty of time to go and see her later, when this crisis was over. Ultimately I stayed where I was and quietly watched.

Lionel kicked the ground and spat, “That damned vixen!”

Still keeping a tight hold of Lionel’s arms, Lord Simeon tried to question him. “What on earth has made you so agitated? You believe that Miss Alice had a role in Raoul’s death?”

Lionel tried to shake himself free, but the difference in strength between them was evident. His slender arms could do nothing but struggle in vain, so he

simply screwed up his face and grunted.

“Answer me, Lionel.”

“The nerve of you! *I’m* the one who should be asking the questions! Why did you kill Raoul? Who pushed him if not Alice?”

“I’d understood it to be an accident. Do you suspect your brother was murdered?”

“An accident? Hah! He’s been terrified of heights ever since he fell from a tree as a child. There is not a chance that he’d come to a place like this and just *happen* to wander right up to the edge. It could not possibly have been an accident, and suicide is unthinkable as well. Someone lured Raoul here and pushed him off the cliff!”

Lionel’s voice rose to a yell. I was left stunned. *Raoul’s death was deemed an accident, but he’s convinced it’s a murder—and he thinks House Flaubert and Alice were the perpetrators?*

“Do you have some grounds for believing this?” asked Lord Simeon. “If there really is a possibility that he was murdered, then I can’t let that go uninvestigated. I’ll listen to everything you have to say, so let’s go back to the other side of the fence.”

“You want me to tell you what I know? Why, so you can destroy the evidence? Are you going to push me over the edge to shut me up?”

“Lionel, I haven’t been to the island for three years. When the accident occurred, I was stationed at Ventvert Palace, a long way from here. My parents and my brothers were nowhere near here either. They were either at home in Sans-Terre or working in Gandia. None of us were on Enciel.”

“So what? Just because you couldn’t kill him by your own hand doesn’t mean you weren’t pulling the strings. There are any number of people you could have hired to do your dirty work. Besides, your grandpa’s been here all along.”

Lord Simeon sighed loudly. “In that case, let me ask what our motivation would be. Why would we want or need to kill Raoul?”

I thought Lionel might be lost for words, or that he’d perhaps become even

more enraged. However, he betrayed both of these expectations and laughed in a deep voice. “Do you think this is nothing but a wild guess? I’ve been investigating. I’ve come here several times in the past year and carefully tracked your dear old grandpa’s activities. Yes, I know very well about House Flaubert’s involvement with smuggling. Raoul found out about your criminal conduct, so you had to silence him. Isn’t that right?”

Lord Simeon sighed again. This time his long breath spoke of comprehension. “I can see how you would come to that conclusion.”

I found myself sighing as well. *Of course the topic of smuggling would come up here as well. We’ve already faced one false accusation on this trip, so why not another? I expect this, too, will prove to be Orta’s fault. We don’t have any evidence yet, but it’s the most likely explanation. How frustrating.*

“Your current visit to the island is part of some dirty scheme as well, isn’t it? There has to be more to that pirate attack than meets the eye.”

“There certainly is, but not in the way you seem to think.” Lord Simeon shook his head and brought the topic back to Raoul and the murder accusation. “Lionel, if what you’re saying is true, I could ‘silence’ you right now without the slightest difficulty. Don’t forget that I’m a trained soldier. If I so desired, I could kill a lone unarmed civilian in less than a minute without any tools. Can you deny that?”

Lionel grimaced.

“I meant what I said. I will listen to every word you have to tell me. However, I need you to calm down. If there really was foul play involved in your brother’s death, we must look into it again. I cannot simply ignore this. I promise that I will dig deep and put all my efforts into finding the truth. However, I can only do that if you’re prepared to listen to me as well.”

Lionel glared at Lord Simeon bitterly. The doubt did not disappear from his face, but it seemed a measure of levelheadedness had returned. The intractable look he had worn before was no longer there.

“Let’s go to my grandfather’s manor. You can meet with him and explain everything you know, and we’ll do the same. We can discuss the suspicions of my family’s involvement in smuggling as well. We’ll conceal absolutely nothing

and I hope we can expect the same from you.”

“Fine,” said Lionel at last. Despite his suspicions, he presumably couldn’t pass up this opportunity to hear what House Flaubert had to say. He was seeking the truth, after all.

Thus he agreed with Lord Simeon’s proposal and did not lash out again even when Lord Simeon let him go. After checking one final time to make sure Lionel really had settled down, Lord Simeon nimbly leapt back over the fence. Lionel, not quite as agile, cautiously clambered up and crossed over as well. Now that I could be certain both of them were safe, I put a hand on my chest in relief.

“Marielle, we’re going now,” said Lord Simeon when we reached me.

I nodded, but then remembered the flowers in my hand. “I’d still like to place these on the cliff.”

“Allow me to do it.” He reached out his hand, determined to prevent me from going any nearer.

Admittedly, the distance from the fence to the edge of the cliff was such that even if I threw the bouquet over, it might not reach. I handed it to him but took a step forward myself as well. “Let’s do it together.”

He showed me a look of disapproval, but agreed anyway. The two of us walked toward the fence and stopped in front of it. He swung his arm hard in the direction of the sea, adding some brief words of prayer as the bouquet flew across. I watched it go while offering a prayer of my own.

Raoul, I know your name, but I sadly never met you. However, if your death was at the hands of some miscreant, I promise we will uncover the truth. We won’t leave Lionel to suffer alone anymore. We’ll join forces with him to investigate. So please, don’t worry.

The bouquet, flying against the backdrop of the sky, was soon blown over the edge of the cliff. Lionel stared fixedly out to sea, his eyes filled with a mixture of anger, doubt, and sadness.

Though this was no great surprise, when we reached the bottom of the path again, there was no sign of Alice.

Apparently she had put on an entirely nonchalant face and told the waiting carriage driver to take her back to the hotel alone, as Lionel would travel with us. Despite appearing incredibly shaken when she had run away, it seemed some part of her had remained levelheaded. She was stronger than she looked.

When our own driver told us this story, I actually felt quite impressed with her resilience. *I suppose we don't need to worry about her too much.*

Lionel had a strong desire to catch up to Alice before going to the lord's manor. "She knows something, I'm sure of it. Otherwise she wouldn't be in such a hurry to run away."

Lord Simeon lacked enthusiasm for this plan, however. "Do you honestly believe we'll be able to have a fruitful discussion with her at this present moment? It would be better to give her some time."

"That's just what she wants," Lionel said. "While we're busy feeling sorry for her, she'll make her escape."

"We're on an island, remember. Escaping won't exactly be straightforward."

"The last ship of the day won't have left the port yet. She could still get off the island."

After listening to this exchange, I glanced over at Lord Simeon and met his eyes. A number of thoughts occurred to me. *Admittedly, if she leaves now, she might just barely make it in time, but could she really hop on board a ship as if it's a stagecoach? A third class ticket might be available without a reservation, but I'm also skeptical that Alice would be comfortable sleeping in a huddle in the bowels of the ship without any privacy.*

We discussed these points and more. Ultimately, leaving her be did present something of a risk, so it was decided that our first stop would be the Azema Hotel, where she and Lionel were staying. As the carriage raced along, we listened to Lionel tell us more about Alice and Raoul.

"That horrible woman used to be an actress at the *Théâtre d'Art*. A mediocre one, by all accounts. She was never especially popular. For reasons known only to him, Raoul grew fond of her and became her patron. By all accounts, their relationship was never purely a financial one. They were romantically involved

from the start.”

The *Théâtre d’Art* was a famous venue indeed. I’d been to see plays there. However, I indeed had no recollection of ever hearing Alice’s name. She had probably never been cast in any prominent roles.

“Our mother wrote to me several times during my studies abroad. She said that Raoul had fallen for an unseemly lower class woman and could not be convinced to part with her. I wish I’d taken the matter more seriously. At the time, I laughed it off. I told her, what’s so wrong with him playing the field? He’s a grown man. It’s normal to take a fancy to some actress or courtesan and take her out on the town.”

Lionel bit his lip with a look of deep regret.

“I don’t believe she was ever more than a diversion for Raoul. I doubt he was seriously considering marriage. However, Mother’s constant complaints and lectures annoyed him, so he started to spend more and more time away from home. That was why he came to this island a year ago—with her.”

“And Alice quit the *Théâtre d’Art* to be with him?”

“That’s right. Regardless of what Raoul might have intended himself, her goal was to secure a marriage at all costs. Mother was right all along. Alice was a despicable woman who only had eyes for his money. When I got back to Lagrange, I asked everyone I could about what had happened, including her. She might not have found much success as an actress, but she put on a good performance for me. I could almost believe she really was lamenting her deceased lover. I’m not as naive as Raoul, though. I could tell straight away that she’s a vixen who tries to wrap men around her little finger. She was already scheming to move on to me.”

Lionel’s voice was filled with hatred as he said this. I recalled Mr. Mereaux suggesting much the same. Was that really her intention, though? To court the older brother now that the younger one was gone?

I was a little skeptical of this. Her behavior toward Lionel did exceed the boundaries of mere friendship at times, but I had never sensed an exclusive fixation on him. She had shown interest in Lord Simeon as well, so she had actually come across as fairly indiscriminate.

Not only that, but her attitude toward Lord Simeon didn't suggest that she was dazzled by his wealth and desperate to marry him. My impression was simply that she would have liked it if he showed an interest in her. It's the kind of hope that any woman might have upon meeting a charming gentleman.

True, she had gotten over her lover's death rather quickly, but what was so wrong with that? She could even be praised for her strength and optimism. *Well, perhaps that's going too far.*

Lord Simeon voiced his doubt as well. "If that's true, it makes it less likely that she'd want to murder Raoul, wouldn't you say? She was the one who stood to lose the most from his passing."

I nodded in agreement.

Angrily, Lionel replied, "That was why I was trying to ask her about it! Raoul died in a place that he would normally stay well away from. You expect me to believe the person who accompanied him to the island had nothing to do with it? It had to be her that brought him there! There's no other explanation!"

"Was she present at the time of the accident?"

He paused. "She insists otherwise—that Raoul went there by himself and she was elsewhere. When questioned at the time, she was able to feign a lack of involvement, but it's clearly a lie. If we catch her before she flees the island, I can apply some pressure and make her spit out the truth."

Is that his excuse for his earlier behavior? I fought an urge to sigh. I understood his desire to find out the truth, but his actions had been far too rough and dangerous. If we hadn't arrived at that very moment, Alice might genuinely have fallen to her death.

Lord Simeon rebuked him with a harsh look. "Even an interrogation has to be done with proper care. One mustn't act in a way that can cause injury or put a life in danger. I'll be the one to question Miss Alice while you stand aside and be quiet. You mustn't even think of interfering and resorting to force."

"Why should I leave you in charge!? This is about *my* brother!"

"He was my relative as well. More to the point, questioning suspects is a major part of my job. There are all sorts of ways to make people talk without

resorting to unnecessary brutality. Your methods are ineffective and, furthermore, put us in a position that is likely to invite sharp criticism afterwards. If you wish to be successful in getting answers out of her, you would do well to leave it in my hands.”

Lionel glared at him with a look of extreme dissatisfaction, but he could present no objection to this. He was forced to accept Lord Simeon’s superior knowledge and skill in this regard. Pouting sullenly, he stopped talking and turned away to look through the window.

While we spoke, we had reached the urban area again. The carriage stopped in front of a remarkably impressive building that was the grandest hotel on the island.

First we went to the reception desk. This was within view of the entrance, and the staff at reception also managed the guests’ keys, so there was no way they wouldn’t know if Alice had returned and gone up to her room. When we asked the employee currently stationed there, he confirmed that she had indeed done so shortly beforehand.

We rushed up to the room and stopped in front of the door. Lord Simeon knocked and called her name, but there was no response, so he tried turning the knob. It opened without resistance; the door was not locked. Through the doorway there appeared to be no signs of habitation. We entered, wondering if she was somewhere inside, but Alice truly was nowhere to be seen.

“Perhaps she didn’t come here after all,” I suggested.

“No, she has definitely been here,” said Lord Simeon, leaning down to pick up something from the floor. “It looks as though we just missed her.”

It was a woman’s handkerchief. Similarly, there was a comb on the dresser that didn’t look like one provided by the hotel, and a careful look around the room revealed various other items that had been left lying around. It seemed she had packed her things in a hurry and fled.

“Curse that wench! We can’t let her escape!”

Lionel sped off. We ran after him as he rushed back down to reception and stormed over to the employee at the desk.

“You! Tell me where that woman went!”

The man was taken aback. “Oh, erm, are you referring to Miss Cernay? Well, as I said, she only arrived here a few minutes ago.”

“She’s gone again already! She must have come past here!”

“She hasn’t, I’m afraid. I’ve been here the whole time and I didn’t see her. No guests have gone in or out other than yourselves.”

“Impossible! Does that mean she’s still in the building!?”

He turned to glance at the staircase we had just descended. This was a large hotel, so it had other staircases as well, not to mention a back exit. We couldn’t be sure where Alice had gone or by what route.

“Shall we split up and search for her?” I suggested. “She can’t have gone far.”

Lord Simeon agreed and we each went to search in a different direction. I simply went out through the normal entrance to the street in front of the hotel. It was unlikely that she was there given that she hadn’t gone past the desk, but there was a chance that she had left via another door and then come around to the front.

As I wandered slightly, looking around for her ostentatious golden brown curls, I wasn’t really looking where I was going and bumped into a passing pedestrian.

“Oh, excuse me.”

Since I hadn’t hit them especially hard, it seemed it would suffice to give a brief apology and move out of the way. However, before I could walk another step, a hand grabbed my arm roughly.

“Is she the one?”

The man who had seized me looked to his two companions. Their clothes were rather too frugal for them to be tourists, but they didn’t seem to be residents of the island, either. They spoke Lagrangian in an accent that bore the hallmarks of the northern regions.

“Brown hair and glasses, a green dress, young and plain looking. It has to be her.”

All three men were young themselves. They peered at me with threatening eyes. A shiver ran through me. *These are no ordinary passersby, are they? Perhaps this was more than a coincidence.*

“Can I help you at all?” I said. I tried to pull my arm away, but the man didn’t let me go. He gripped even tighter and suddenly pulled me closer with quite some force.

“Be quiet, all right? If you don’t make a fuss, I won’t have to hurt you.” After threatening me in a low voice, he began to walk, pulling me along with him.

I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m not going to just silently accept this. I’m about to be kidnapped!

I held my feet firmly in place. “Let go of me!”

“I told you to be quiet! Stop causing a scene and come over here!”

Ignoring him, I screamed at the top of my lungs, “Stop! Somebody help me! I’m being kidnapped! Please, Lord Simeon!”

Everyone walking nearby turned to see what was going on. *That will make it harder for them to act. Surely they can’t hurt me with so many eyes on them.*

Hoping that if I made enough of a fuss they would give up, I tried to scream again. However, in an instant the one holding me put a hand over my mouth.

One of his companions clicked his tongue. “People are watching!”

“We have to go, now!” said the other.

He began to forcibly drag me along. There was nothing I could do to resist. *Please, somebody help me!* I looked around desperately. People were shouting toward the hotel and some employees had run out through the door. *Hopefully Lord Simeon is coming as well. I have to stall for time somehow. I have to brace my legs again—but, no, I can’t!*

The man lifted me up by the waist and started running with me in his arms. I started kicking, hoping that I could slow him down at least slightly.

Just then, an extremely loud voice resounded through the air. “You bastards! Get your filthy paws off my granddaughter-in-law!”

Granddaughter-in-law? But before I could think anything further, the man was knocked over, sending me tumbling down as well. Though his arms finally released me, I was now sprawled out on the ground. I groaned in pain; I had grazed my hands and banged my knees. It hurt enough that I couldn't stand up for the moment.

"Ugh, dammit! Marielle, are you all right!?"

The owner of the voice rushed over in a panic. I knew who it was without even seeing him, but I was somewhat surprised by his crudeness.

Lord Donatien helped me to sit up. In an emotional voice he asked, "Are you injured? Where does it hurt!?"

"No, I'm fine. I hit the ground slightly hard, but I'm not injured."

I brushed off the dirt clinging to my hands. Although I was in pain, I didn't think it constituted an injury; I was barely bleeding at all. It had been a big shock, that was all.

The man he had punched was lying nearby, out cold. *No surprise that Lord Simeon's teacher is a force to be reckoned with, even with his advanced years. Muscle is muscle, regardless of age.*

The remaining men appeared to sense the danger they were in. They tried to abandon their comrade and make a break for it—but another man in possession of impressive musculature had also arrived, and this one had youth on his side. He quickly ran ahead and blocked their escape route.

"How *dare* you do such a thing to my Marielle?"

The light blue eyes only looked my way for a second, but they burned with a composed yet atrociously vicious blaze.

I could point out that my current state is actually a side effect of his grandfather punching the other man, but I don't feel any obligation to defend them. Instead, I silently watched and let the ruffians reap what they had sown.

Afterwards, he came over with one of the unconscious men dangling from each of his hands. "Are you all right?"

I stood up, offered a hand by Lord Donatien.

How odd that everyone around is hanging back and trembling in fear when such a gallant prince has arrived. Admittedly he looks more like a demon than a prince right now, but surely that, too, is worthy of praise! In fact, doesn't that make him even more dashing? Here he is, the brutal black-hearted military officer! Or does he go beyond that? Does this excessive level of intensity push him into "monster" territory? Perhaps you shouldn't drag two fully grown men along the ground quite so casually, Lord Simeon! You'll stop looking like a human!

"What happened? Who are these men?"

"I don't know. They suddenly attacked me. It sounded as though they were targeting me specifically."

There was little I could tell them, but I recounted the events. Hearing that they had been about to abduct me, Lord Simeon and his grandfather glared down at the men even more severely.

"Was it a ransom kidnapping?" suggested Lord Donatien. "They planned to kidnap her knowing that she was a member of House Flaubert?"

"I didn't think there was anyone on this island foolish enough to put their own life in danger by doing such a thing."

These two members of the noted military family, the former head and the current heir, were both clearly astonished at such a brazen act. They sighed heavily, at which point Lionel belatedly arrived.

"What are you doing? The wench is—"

Halfway through voicing his objection, he noticed Lord Donatien's presence and fell silent.

"What wench?" asked the old man.

Lord Simeon answered for him. "We were in the middle of searching for someone. Incidentally, what are you doing here, Grandfather?"

"I came to see how Lionel was. Good to see you again, Lionel. You appear to be in higher spirits than I expected. Don't you think it's a little unsociable to come all this way only to stay in a hotel? Come and visit the manor. It's been

years since we've been able to sit down and have a proper chat. I'd love to hear all about—"

Lionel interrupted this kind invitation. "We don't have time for this! We need to look for Alice right now! We can't let her get away!" He looked ready to stamp his feet in frustration.

This prompted both me and Lord Simeon to recall the urgency of what we had been doing. We indeed didn't have time to be standing around idly.

Lord Simeon asked his grandfather to watch the ruffians and recruited the hotel employees that had gathered nearby to help with the search. I tried to look around for her too. It was too late, however. She could not be found anywhere inside the hotel or in the surrounding area. Nor could we find anyone who had seen her. It was as if she had disappeared into thin air.

Chapter Eleven

The ruffians confessed that they had been recruited to do the job in exchange for money. The person who made the request was unknown to them—it was someone who had simply approached them on the street—and they knew nothing about my background either. All they had was a request to abduct me and a promise of payment.

Asking around revealed that the men were laborers from the mainland who were notorious for causing trouble on the island. This incident was the *coup de grâce* that would probably lead to them being sent off to prison at last.

There were a lot of intriguing details here, but we couldn't stay focused on these men for long. We left Lord Donatien to deal with the aftermath and headed straight for the port. If Alice was going to escape, she needed to leave the island, which meant we might have some hope of stopping her if we found which boat she was boarding and stopped it from departing.

There were two ships in port waiting to leave, both of them large vessels that carried both cargo and passengers. Staying together would slow us down, so we agreed to split up again. Although Lord Simeon was unhappy about leaving me on my own again, I pointed out that the Duchesnay Shipping Company's local office was quite nearby and reassured him that I'd simply go there and ask for assistance.

Lord Simeon and Lionel made their way to the offices of the companies responsible for the two ships. After seeing them off, I went inside the Duchesnay office and asked if Mr. Mereaux was available. The receptionist kindly sent word and he soon appeared.

"Good day to you. What can I help you with? Do you need a ship?" He spoke casually, seeming to assume I was there with a tourist inquiry.

"I'm sorry to bother you when you're busy working. I'm wondering if I could ask your assistance with a particular matter. I fear it is a rather complicated one."

I said nothing more than that, but also cast my eyes around the room with a very intentional fashion. He immediately deduced what I was trying to suggest.

“Certainly. By all means, follow me. You can tell me all about it over a cup of tea.”

Mr. Mereaux took me through a doorway into a corridor. The next door he led me to opened into the personal office he used in his role as the head of the company’s local branch.

At the far end of the room stood an impressive desk, while closer to us sat a simple table and chairs for receiving guests. He sat me down and began to pour some tea. “I’m afraid I don’t have a maid to take care of these things in a more respectable manner as a nobleman would. You’ll have to put up with my own attempt.”

“You’ve no need to be embarrassed at all. I’m grateful for it.”

I raised the teacup to my lips, genuinely glad to be offered a drink. My throat had gotten rather dry from the afternoon’s activity.

He sat down across from me and took a sip from his own cup. “So, what can I do for you? It sounds as though you’re in a spot of bother.”

I hurriedly explained what had happened with Alice that day and why we were looking for her, then asked, “If she wants to leave the island, is boarding a passenger ship here at Cours port her only option? Are there any other ports where it would be possible to do that?”

“There are various other ports used by the locals, but this is the only one that sends ships further afield than the surrounding waters. The fishing boats never travel to the mainland. Honestly, though, I find it hard to believe that Alice would do a thing like that to Raoul.”

He furrowed his brow. Despite his negative view of Alice, his expression said that he still didn’t believe she was a murderer.

“We still don’t know if it’s true,” I replied. “It’s only Lionel’s speculation, with no other supporting evidence. It might indeed have been an accident. Either way, we need to take the time to discuss it with Alice properly. Her sudden disappearance does cast more suspicion on her. If it’s all a big

misunderstanding, we need to firmly establish that, or else Lionel is likely to lash out at her again.”

“Yes, I see. It would be quite a problem for my boss’s son to become a wanted criminal. We really do need to stop him.” Mr. Mereaux had known Lionel a lot longer than I had and was very familiar with his personality. It seemed he understood my concerns well enough to readily offer his help. “Understood. I’ll have my men search for Alice. If we cast a wide net over the port, we’ll catch her the moment she turns up. Leave it to me.”

His confident words filled me with relief. *How helpful that we’re on an island. Even if she tries to escape, it’ll all be for nothing if she can’t make it onto a ship.* “Thank you most kindly. In that case, can I ask you to send a message to the lord’s manor if there’s any news?”

“Yes, I’ll do just that.”

With the conversation coming to a close, I stood up. I’d done what I could, so it was time to reconvene with Lord Simeon. When I turned to go, Mr. Mereaux opened the door for me and I said goodbye. However, as I was leaving, I noticed something out of the corner of my eye. A woman’s parasol was leaning behind a nearby bookcase.

“Is that an item of lost property?”

The white parasol with a lacy trim couldn’t have belonged to Mr. Mereaux, nor could it conceivably have been a personal effect of one of the employees.

“Left behind by a passenger,” he said casually. “Someone visiting my office set it down and forgot about it. She might be back to get it later, so I’m holding onto it for now.”

“I see,” I replied, picking up the parasol and looking it over. It was still in an almost brand new condition, with no dirt or grime on it at all. “Was it left here today?”

“No, it’s been here for about three days already. Maybe she’s completely forgotten about it or simply decided this one parasol isn’t worth coming all the way back here for.”

“Oh dear, what a waste of such a fine parasol. If the owner doesn’t reappear,

could I have it?”

He chuckled. “I don’t mind giving it to you, but couldn’t you ask your husband to buy you as many parasols as you want?”

Smiling back at him, I put the parasol down again. We left the room together and I thanked both him and his staff for all their assistance before exiting the building.

I began walking toward the office at which Lord Simeon was inquiring, all the while keeping a measured pace so that it looked like nothing was out of the ordinary. *Calm and ladylike, not hurried or panicked.*

“Hey, are you here on your own?”

This sudden voice nearby made me jump. When I turned, I was met with red hair and golden eyes. “Don’t scare me!”

“Huh? I wasn’t trying to scare you. All I did was ask a question.”

“I’m just a tad nervous right now.”

Sasha snorted as if he found my behavior ridiculous. Roche was nowhere nearby, so it seemed he was on his own as well.

“Do you have anything new to report?” I asked.

“It’s been less than a day. These things don’t happen overnight, you know. I’m only here on patrol. How come you’re by yourself? Have you abandoned your husband?”

“He’s not far from here. More importantly, I’d like you to come over here, please.” I hurriedly moved to a more secluded spot and beckoned to a frowning Sasha.

“Why are you being so sneaky?”

“The situation demands a certain degree of sneakiness. Are any of your comrades nearby right now? Locals that you’re certain you can trust?”

“Yes, plenty of them. Comrades and other people I know. Why?”

“I’d like to ask you to keep a watch over the Duchesnay Shipping Company office. Are you familiar with Mr. Mereaux, the head of the local branch?”

“Well, yes. What about him?”

“He’s been meeting with a woman around the same age as me. She’s pretty and fashionably dressed, with golden brown hair, and... Hmm, let me think. Her hair is tightly curled and always decorated with elaborate accessories. She arrived yesterday on the same ship as us.”

After I did my best to describe her, Sasha clapped his hands together with a look of recognition. “Oh, her! The one who was clinging to the Duchesnay bloke and looked at you like she really hated you.”

“Yes, that’s the one. I’m glad you remember.” Now that I recalled, Sasha had been there when we met her shortly after boarding the ship in Marable. If he knew what she looked like, that could make all the difference. I was thankful for his good memory.

“You’re saying you want us to keep watch over those two? What’s this about? Does it have some connection to the smuggling case?”

“Actually, no. It’s a separate matter.”

We truly did have too many problems to deal with at the moment. Wearily, I explained the background of our search for Alice—and what I had just seen in Mr. Mereaux’s office.

“That was my parasol that I lost on board the *Decoration*. I picked it up and checked the engraving, so I’m absolutely certain. It was made to order, so there couldn’t be another one exactly like it. Alice definitely visited that office. Mr. Mereaux lied to me.”

“Wait, hold on a moment,” he said, interrupting my explanation in a flustered tone. “I can’t follow any of this. Why does it matter that the parasol was yours? How does that mean this Alice woman went to Mereaux’s office?”

Restraining my impatience, I explained further. “Let’s suppose the crew of the *Decoration* had found it and passed it on to him. Why would he then claim it had been left there by a passenger visiting his office? He could simply say it was found on board the ship.”

Sasha nodded with a face that said he still only half understood.

I continued, “Someone must have picked it up and kept it for themselves rather than handing it over to the crew, which raises the question of who exactly found it. In theory it could be anyone who was on board, but I have strong reason to believe it was Alice. You see, I posed Mr. Mereaux something of a trick question. I asked him if the parasol had been left there today. However, he went out of his way to tell me it had been there for three days—which is completely impossible, because we only arrived yesterday.”

“Right,” said Sasha hesitantly.

I took a breath to calm myself. *Don't panic. There's plenty of time. Neither Alice nor Mr. Mereaux can act immediately.* “This in turn makes me ask why he would need to tell such a lie. Naturally, it's because he didn't want to come across as suspicious. He probably hadn't noticed the parasol until I pointed it out. It was mostly hidden from view, and Alice had to have been there shortly beforehand. Either I arrived immediately after she left, or she was in fact still in the building. My arrival was so sudden that he had no chance to notice the parasol and hide it properly.”

Comprehension finally dawned in Sasha's eyes. “Ah, right! So he had to come up with a lie on the spot!”

I nodded and said, “Exactly. I laid a trap just to see if he would respond that way. He could have simply said it was lost property that had been given to him today. There would have been nothing unnatural about that at all. However, his desire to hide Alice's visit drove him to lie about it, which in fact served to expose that he was hiding something.”

No doubt, he had been worried that I knew what sort of items Alice owned. That was why he had said three days, placing it before Alice had arrived on the island. Little did he know that it was my very own parasol and he was digging his own grave.

Why, though, would he be so determined to shelter Alice that he would tell a lie like that? It's alarming to think about. Perhaps Lionel's suspicions are entirely on target. Raoul's death might not have been an accident, but a murder—and Alice and Mr. Mereaux might have been involved. If so, what motivated them? Why did they want Raoul dead?

“Considering how dimwitted you look, you’re surprisingly clever.” Despite Sasha looking very impressed as he said this, the words themselves were difficult to take as a compliment.

“Thank you,” I replied as politely as I could muster. “In any case, that’s why we need to know who goes in and out of that building. We have to pin down Alice’s whereabouts.”

“You can leave it to me!” said Sasha, accepting the task with gusto. “All I have to do is say the word and I’ll have ten or twenty men watching their front door.”

“You have to be subtle! Those two mustn’t notice a thing.”

“I know! It’s all under control!”

Cheerfully, he dashed away from our hiding place. I still harbored a little uncertainty as to just how under control it really was, but there was nothing I could do now but trust him and hope for the best.

I hurried to find Lord Simeon. The two of us reconvened with Lionel as well and made our way back to the manor, where Lord Donatien was already waiting. I told them all the same thing I had told Sasha.

Learning about this made Lionel flare up with anger again. “Hector is in league with that infernal woman!? How *dare* he play innocent all this time!”

Lord Donatien’s brow furrowed. “I do recall hearing about this Alice girl last year. At the time, I ordered a thorough investigation, and she was mentioned in the report. In particular, she and Raoul had an argument shortly before the accident.”

He asked the butler to retrieve the relevant documents, then presented them to us.

“Yes, it’s all written down here. They had a quarrel over something trivial and broke off their relationship, which was why she and Raoul were in different places. Raoul went to the cliff and fell while Alice, according to her own statement, was shopping in town. This was also verified by witnesses.”

The investigation report was rather voluminous. It was clear at a glance that this matter had not been treated lightly. Those in charge had thought of every

possibility—accident, murder, and everything in between—and scrupulously looked into them all.

“Beyond that, there was no report of Raoul being involved in any kind of dispute, so there was no obvious reason he might have been murdered. The conclusion was that he visited the cliff to clear his mind or some such.”

“That is a logical deduction,” said Lord Simeon. “However, according to Lionel, Raoul was terrified of heights, making it unlikely that he would choose such a place to clear his mind.”

“Hmm, I see what you mean.”

The group fell silent for a time. Lionel glared at the documents with great resentment while Lord Simeon scanned them and considered the details within. The meticulous eyes of the Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights took in every piece of information, one by one, until at one point his hands suddenly stopped thumbing through the pages.

“I can’t help noticing that a large proportion of those who gave testimony are connected to the Duchesnay family and its business.”

“What was that?” replied Lionel.

Lord Simeon pointed out a number of lines in the report. “The idea that Raoul’s life was otherwise entirely free of problems comes from Alice’s unreliable testimony. The only others who confirmed it have a direct connection to the family.”

Leaning forward with a look of quiet rage, Lionel peered down at the portions Lord Simeon indicated with his finger.

“See? From the crew of the ship he arrived on to the laborers and office workers, almost everyone mentioned here works for the Duchesnay Shipping Company. Their employer is always noted in the margins of the pages. Some work for the Azema Hotel instead, but Duchesnay is a major investor in that hotel, with a large measure of control over it even though they don’t manage it directly.”

Lionel picked up the pages and gripped them with a trembling hand while Lord Simeon continued.

“Even the shops Miss Alice claims to have visited that day were under the Duchesnay umbrella. Given the nature of the tourist trade on this island, it is inevitable that all those who gave statements were connected to the business, but the potential for bias does make me rather uneasy.”

“What are you implying?” demanded Lionel.

I knew exactly what he was implying. The most relevant witnesses, the ones Lord Simeon had pointed out in particular, could be counted on one hand. Such a small number of people could, in theory, have agreed on a story amongst themselves before telling the investigators.

“Perhaps this was unavoidable, however. Any inquiry into people Raoul knew would extend primarily to those with a connection.”

At this point, Lord Donatien continued where Lord Simeon left off. “Ah, but that’s where what Marielle told us comes in. If Hector Mereaux and Alice Cernay have been conspiring together all along, their testimony loses all credibility. Also, given Mereaux’s position, it would have been easy for him to ask the others to lie for him.”

“I doubt he was as blatant as that,” said Lord Simeon. “Asking them specifically to lie could potentially have invited even greater suspicion. He likely hinted at the possibility of suicide and then asked them simply to avoid saying anything that might cause a scandal for Mr. and Mrs. Duchesnay. Those whose livelihoods depended on the Duchesnays’ good humor would then keep their mouths shut of their own accord.”

“Yes, I see,” his grandfather replied.

I surreptitiously took in Lionel’s expression. He had blanched upon hearing that he might have been betrayed by one of his family’s own employees. I saw more than just rage on his face; no doubt he also felt rather hurt.

“This also provides an explanation for the attempted abduction of Marielle in town today. Someone who was helping Miss Alice make her escape must have wanted to create a distraction. While we were preoccupied, she slipped through our fingers. It’s entirely likely she had help from among the hotel staff as well.”

So it was all a diversionary tactic. That does seem to fit. It seemed too sudden and too poor a plan otherwise. Why else would anyone risk kidnapping me in Flaubert territory while both Lord Donatien and Lord Simeon were on the island? It would be sheer madness. The chances of success were unfathomably low.

Their methods had been rather sloppy as well. The real goal was not the abduction itself, but the commotion it had caused. They were there to slow down our pursuit of Alice.

Lord Donatien folded his arms. “Let’s assume for a moment that Alice Cernay is the one who killed Raoul. What reason would Mereaux have to help her cover it up? We need to thoroughly reconsider their relationship.”

“Yes, that’s true,” said Lord Simeon.

Although Mr. Mereaux had presented a facade of strong dislike toward Alice, it turned out that they were working together. I was unsure of how to reconcile this. Had there perhaps been some hidden meaning in his words to her? While making me believe he found her behavior scandalous, was he actually warning her not to be too careless, for example?

“Lionel, I know it’s difficult to remain calm at present, but if we act imprudently we’ll alert the two of them to our suspicion. I must ask you to restrain yourself. Thanks to Marielle’s careful approach when meeting with Mereaux, they won’t yet know that we’re aware of their collusion. We must maintain this pretense or we may never uncover the truth.”

Lionel bit his lip and remained silent while Lord Donatien rubbed his back reassuringly.

The Flaubert men decided to request assistance from the military garrison as well and sent an urgent message. Although their relationship with Lord Donatien had been frosty of late owing to the machinations of the Republic of Orta, a request from him was one they could never ignore. *They’ll now be keeping a strict watch over anyone leaving the island, I’m sure. With Sasha and his comrades on our side as well, it can’t be too long before we find Alice.*

Alongside this, there was a need to keep Lionel on a short leash. Left to his own devices, he would no doubt have lost patience and stormed into Mr. Mereaux’s office. Rushing ahead without any firm proof had the potential to

ruin all hope of success. To avoid the risk, it was agreed that he would stay in the manor.

Although he submitted to this, he looked deeply unhappy. He didn't eat dinner with us, instead shutting himself in his room and not coming out all night. I felt an urge to ask if he still somehow blamed House Flaubert even after everything he had heard today, but I knew that it would make no difference, so all I could do was pray that we would quickly find Alice and uncover the truth.

After dinner I took a bath, and then it was almost time for bed. At last, Lord Simeon and I could quietly retire to our room together. It had been a hectic day all round. In fact, I had the feeling we had been busy from the moment we left Sans-Terre port. I'd made plenty of new memories that were enjoyable in their own way, but there were still mountains of unresolved worries.

"This trip is certainly not what I expected. It's been far more complicated."

I opened the window and felt the night breeze as I gazed out. Lights were visible over the sea. I had recently learned that the fishermen go out at night and catch fish and squid that crowd around the lights. There were also the naval patrol boats that had been sent out tonight to ensure Alice didn't escape in secret.

Drying off his hair, Lord Simeon walked over to me. "Most intriguing. So even you would rather be able to relax?"

My word, he simply exudes amorous appeal. No matter how many times I see it, I want to worship him.

"I'm still enjoying myself. Only, it's all rather nerve-wracking. Meeting your grandfather went so smoothly that it was almost an anticlimax, but I never expected our other problems to go on this long."

Lord Simeon stood behind me and wrapped his arms around my body. I could sense his slightly damp warmth and the scent of soap. "You needn't worry. We'll resolve all of it, I promise you. Your efforts have given us a promising new lead, and I'm confident that if we conduct a new investigation from a different perspective than a year ago, new facts will come to light."

“Yes, I’m sure you’re right.” I laid my hands on his. Spending this quiet time together felt very comfortable. “Did Sasha manage to learn anything?”

Sasha had come to give a report while I was in the bath. Lord Simeon had already informed me that he hadn’t found Alice yet, but I was hoping there might have been some other new development.

He didn’t answer immediately. He seemed to be mulling over the details and summing it up in his mind. When he spoke, he did so slowly, as though he was trying to convince himself as well. “They didn’t find Miss Alice, but there was someone else who visited the Duchesnay office in a particularly furtive-looking manner. It remains unclear whether they have any connection to the case. The men tried to give chase, but they lost the trail along the way.”

“Oh, I see.”

“The port is always rather crowded, and in the evening light it’s easy to disappear. It is possible they were making use of that on purpose, but also...”

He stopped talking mid-sentence. I waited for him to continue, but he took a breath and his tone became brighter and more reassuring.

“Well, you needn’t worry about it. As I’ve said many times, this is an island. There are only a limited number of ways to leave, and the locals are tight-knit. Anyone acting strangely will soon stand out. We’re doing all we can right now, so you should stay here and rest tomorrow. You’ll tire yourself out if you go out walking every day.”

His precise wording held an implication I didn’t like. I turned my head and glared up at him. “What about you, Lord Simeon? Will you be staying here?” Needless to say, I was not enthusiastic about the prospect of being left by myself.

He looked back at me with an awkward smile. “I’m afraid I don’t have that freedom. I must meet with the officers at the garrison and continue investigating, but there’s no need for you to join me. It also involves going to certain places that aren’t entirely suitable for a woman to enter. Can’t you just be patient and stay here?”

When he spoke like that, it was difficult to object. I pouted sullenly, but all he

did was shake his head quietly.

Forced to accept that I couldn't accompany him, I proposed an alternative. "In that case, would you mind if I went to Sasha's village instead?"

"What for? If you want to bake some bread, you can do it here."

"Why is that the first thing you thought of!? I have something entirely different in mind. I'd like to make another attempt at the challenge that defeated me yesterday."

Having gathered what I was suggesting, Lord Simeon's face grew exasperated. "You want to visit the pirates' hideout?"

"Yes. This time I'll be properly outfitted for the journey in clothes made for walking. It will make up for yesterday, when my hopes of seeing the hideout were cruelly dashed at the last minute."

"I must say, it would be better to avoid going there at present. The less attention it attracts, the better. Surely you understand that."

Without mentioning it specifically, he was hinting at the cache of guns hidden there. *I understand his point, certainly, but remaining at the manor on my own would be too dull for words.*

I replied, "I imagine if you visited the hideout again it might draw some notice, but if I go on my own, surely it won't seem so odd. I'll ask Sasha to show me the way, of course, so I'm sure he'll be able to judge whether the situation seems overly risky. In any case, the only other people around will be the villagers, and I doubt we need to worry about them."

He looked at me uncertainly.

"Are you so strongly against it? All I want to do is go in and have a quick peek. You can't possibly think I want to fire one of the guns, do you? I only want to confirm the shape and weight of them, and how it feels to hold one. Firing them would be a step too far."

I felt a weight on my head as Lord Simeon rested his chin on me. "You do wish to touch them, however. I would much rather you didn't. Imagining it terrifies me."

“I told you, I would never want to actually fire a gun. It’s purely for research purposes. The very concept of a pirate’s lair, teeming with hidden treasure... It’s a scene that makes my heart come alive. I simply have to see it.”

“Dear oh dear. Is your next book going to be about pirates, in that case?”

“I’m strongly considering it. The premise could be that the protagonist’s childhood friend grew up and became a pirate. What do you think?”

“My advice is for her to break up with him. He’s a criminal.”

“Honestly! Very well, I’ll include you as a levelheaded military officer who tries to tear them apart.”

“That wouldn’t bother me. I’m secure in the knowledge that my wife is not a pirate’s childhood friend, but a genuine noblewoman, even if she is a little odd.”

His voice and breath drew closer to my ear. With a laugh that tickled against me, he closed the window, turned me around, then lifted me into his arms. He carried me over to the bed, and—well, I’m sure I needn’t explain what we began to do next.

He took off my glasses, and moments later, his large body leaned down over me. Even though no lights were lit in the room, the full moon outside shone brilliantly enough for us to see each other with ease.

Good heavens, this is embarrassing. It’s too bright for this. Can’t we make it darker somehow?

I let out a soft moan. This act, this sharing of our passion for one another, was not something I disliked. On the contrary, I liked it very much. I simply couldn’t get used to it. I was so self-conscious about so many aspects that it overwhelmed me every time.

Still, being able to feel Lord Simeon with my whole body made me happy. Seeing him in a state that he showed no one but me, seeing a face that he showed no one but me—I adored it too much to bear. I thoroughly understood now the way that couples deepened their love for one another. There were still many, many things that I couldn’t learn just from reading books.

Breathing heavily, we embraced. The incomparable sense of joy and

contentment was so enthralling that I felt my body might lose all shape and melt away.

Oh no, the moon is watching. Stop it! No peeking! This is a secret between a husband and wife. Please go and hide behind the clouds. Surround us with the still darkness of night.

The heat, the breathing, and the trickles of sweat were for the two of us alone. This was a secret moment to be hidden away behind a jet black curtain and—

Black...

For a split second, a thought flashed in the back of my mind. In my delirious half-awareness I tried to chase after it, but it was swept away by the overpowering waves. With no means or strength to resist, I let out a voice I couldn't restrain and surrendered myself to the moment of supreme bliss.



Chapter Twelve

I awoke slightly late the next morning, opening my eyes to see that Lord Simeon was not beside me.

It seemed he had gone out early, just as he had said he would. I couldn't even bid him a good morning. *I suppose it's my own fault for sleeping in, but...no, actually, that's his fault as well!*

Either way, I had wrested permission from Lord Simeon before going to sleep, so I asked Joanna to make preparations for my own departure.

After getting dressed, I went down to the dining room, where I found Lord Simeon's grandfather drinking coffee and reading a newspaper. "Good morning, Lord Donatien."

His eyes widened at the sight of me. "I see you've pulled out all the stops today."

I put my hands on my hips and beamed proudly. "I have indeed. There'll be no repeat of the other day. Now no hill will be a challenge for me, no matter how steep!"

Not wearing a corset did leave me feeling slightly uneasy, but on the other hand, it made me far more agile than usual. Absolutely nothing obstructed my movement. I wore no long skirt that might get entangled with my legs, nor any accessories that would flap all over the place. Instead, I was clad in a men's shirt and trousers and tightly laced walking boots. As the *pièce de résistance*, my hair had been tied into a tight bun. I was perfectly equipped for any expedition.

Joanna, who had kindly procured all the necessary elements, had not seemed entirely approving, but I didn't see anything wrong with it. When I had looked in the mirror, it was as though a different person was staring back at me. What a thrill that was.

As for Lord Donatien, he seemed almost too accepting. "I can see what Simeon saw in you."

You do know I wasn't wearing this when he fell in love with me, don't you? I was just wearing a normal dress.

"You're going to Sasha's village, isn't that right? Do be aware that it might rain today." He looked out of the window anxiously. After several days of clear skies, the sky had clouded over.

"I'll be careful."

"I wish I could go with you, but I have some appointments today. I hope you have fun."

"Thank you, I'm sure I will!"

After eating breakfast, I left straight away. Given my destination, I didn't plan to bring an attendant with me. I couldn't go entirely on my own, of course; in order to get there, I would have to avail myself of one of Lord Donatien's yachts. However, I had no need of a lady's maid. I picked up my shoulder bag filled with expedition gear and said goodbye to Joanna, who appeared distinctly anxious.

Just as I was about to get into the carriage, Lionel ran toward me from inside the manor. "Where do you think you're going?"

Having remained in self-imposed seclusion all night, he had finally come out of his room. I greeted him with a smile and said, "Good morning. I'm going to visit a friend in his village."

He stared at my clothes questioningly. I had the sense that he was expressing judgment—criticizing me for going out on a casual jaunt when we still didn't know where Alice was. I could understand that, but it wasn't as though I could do much good sitting in the manor.

"Simeon seems to have rushed out the door on some secret business, too," said Lionel.

"He's continuing with the search for Alice. He told me he has to meet the local military officers and various other parties."

This was the straightforward truth, but he narrowed his eyes even more suspiciously. "What scheme is he plotting? Him and the old man."

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed! There’s been a steady stream of people going in and out of the manor since last night—and I’m not talking about any servants. They’re probably doing your husband’s dirty work.”

Is he referring to Sasha? It sounds as though he saw more people than Sasha alone, though. Whoever it was, they were probably just helping with the search. Regardless, it was Lionel’s own choice to turn his back and shut himself away, so it’s slightly late for him to complain about being excluded.

While I stood there quietly bothered by this, Lionel strode forward and barged past me. He climbed into the carriage before I could. “I’m going with you.”

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t think you can pull the wool over my eyes. Whatever you lot are planning, I’ll see it with my own eyes.”

He quickly took up position on the seat, reclining with his legs outstretched and occupying most of the space.

This turn of events made me even more concerned. We had told him the truth behind the “pirate attack,” but I didn’t know to what extent he had believed us. Bringing him to the hideout felt like a careless move.

“What’s wrong? Is there some reason you don’t want me to join you?”

As I pondered, he delivered another blow. *If I show too much resistance, he’ll only grow more suspicious.* I had no choice but to join him in the carriage.

Inside, I had to squeeze myself into the corner. *Honestly, if you’re riding with another person, it’s rude to stretch your legs out so far! What an arrogant, self-important man!*

The driver closed the door and set off, at which point Lionel asked another question. “Well? Where are we going?”

“First to the port. Then we’re going to take a boat and sail around the coast to a village called Thio.”

“And what’s so special about this village?”

“It’s home to a descendant of Captain d’Indy. The famous pirate captain had a hideout very close to the village, and it’s there that the local guard has stored the guns they seized from the *Decoration*. I was so eager to see it last time we went there, but I wasn’t dressed for the occasion, so I couldn’t manage it. This time I’ve rectified that mistake.”

Lionel snorted. He looked me up and down with undisguised mockery in his eyes. “I really don’t understand his taste in women. He had an endless stream of beauties fawning over him and never gave any of them the time of day. Why did he marry someone who’s so bizarre inside and out?”

This sort of abuse wouldn’t normally bother me, but it hit harder because of my choice of clothing. I didn’t want him to have a lower opinion of Lord Simeon because of me. Suddenly, this outfit that I’d been so keen on made me feel somewhat embarrassed.

In a dispirited tone, I replied, “I can’t go there unless I’m dressed for the journey. If I could have managed it in a dress, of course I would have done so.”

“What’s truly bizarre is that you’re so eager to go there in the first place.”

My word, what am I to say to that? I never expected to be so defeated by the words of Mr. Self-Important. For someone who spent all his time behaving in a way that was far outside the norm, he knew exactly how to attack other people for doing the same.

He turned away in a huff and stared at the landscape passing by outside the window, his chin resting in his hand.

“I’m used to women devoting their lives to dressing up and looking pretty. I assumed they were all like that. Alice is a prime example. She spends all her time fussing over jewels and dresses. If she sees a woman dressed more finely than her, she flares her nostrils and does everything she can to tear the other woman down. It’s amusing and ugly and, quite honestly, something I pity.”

I thought back to the times I had met Alice. I could well believe that she had a tendency to criticize other women. This was undoubtedly the main reason she glared at me with such disdain.

Acting is a profession that involves being in the public eye, watched by all

around, so perhaps it gives rise to that sort of mindset. Still, she's given up on her acting career, hasn't she?

We arrived at the port in uncomfortable silence and transferred over to the yacht. The strong wind and high waves made me uneasy, but Thomas, the man who would be steering the yacht along with his son, confidently said that we needn't worry. "It's better to have some wind behind us. We'll be in Thio in no time."

The yacht departed. Certainly, it moved at a higher speed than the boat I'd traveled in two days earlier. It still shook terribly, but the coastal scenery practically flew past our eyes.

During the journey, we passed by the cliff. The waves beat strongly against the rocks below it. Even looking up at it from below was frightening, and it was painful to imagine someone falling from the top and landing here. I had never even seen Raoul's face, but I felt so sorry for him.

I offered a silent prayer. Beside me, Lionel, too, stared fixedly at the cliff.

At last the boat arrived in Thio. I got off with some assistance from Thomas, while Lionel appeared rather seasick and staggered awkwardly onto dry land.

Leaving Thomas and his son to wait for our return, we climbed up the hillside path. I walked far more easily than last time. Before I knew it, a voice called out from above. "Oh, it's you. Something wrong?"

Sasha was in front of his house surrounded by fish. He appeared to be preparing them to be dried; I could see more fish hanging up all over the village.

"Good morning," I replied.

"Right, good morning. I'm just wondering why you came all the way here. Did you want to bake some more bread?"

"Why did both you and Lord Simeon immediately think of bread?"

Mildly annoyed, I walked up to Sasha. He directed a puzzled look at Lionel, who followed behind me. "How come you're with the Duchesnay bloke today instead of your husband? Wait, don't tell me you're having an affair!? You're a newlywed, isn't it a little soon to be cheating!? You'd better stop it right now! If

that husband of yours gets angry, there'll be hell to pay!"

"I will never, ever betray Lord Simeon, not until the end of time! Besides, even if I did, Lord Simeon would be more depressed than angry! In certain cases he can be surprisingly weak in the face of adversity. He doesn't have much experience with setbacks and frustration, you see."

Lionel looked utterly stunned. Meanwhile, having heard the voices, Lara poked her head out from the house next door.

"So? What *did* you come here for, then?" asked Sasha.

"Can't you tell by how I'm dressed? I've come to go on the journey I couldn't manage the other day. I want to see the secret hideout."

Though I held myself with pride, he grimaced back at me. "I thought you gave up on that."

"I don't recall saying any such thing. I merely put it off temporarily because it was impossible for me at the time. I've come here today with Lord Simeon's full permission. Would you mind leading me there?"

He appeared reluctant. "Well, I would rather not show too many outsiders where it is. It's the special hideout passed down by our ancestors. It's supposed to be a secret, you know? If everyone knows about it, it's not a secret anymore. What happens if word gets out and it ends up overrun with tourists?"

"You showed Lord Simeon, didn't you?"

"There was no other choice. That man's not easy to say no to. He's scary. He also promised not to tell anyone at all. I could make you promise the same thing, but if I keep telling people and making them promise the same thing, in the end it stops being a secret anymore."

"Well, yes, I suppose."

It's not as though I'm planning to spread rumors about it. It would be an interesting theme to use in my writing, but I won't use it exactly as is. I'll rework it enough that no one would ever recognize the original source.

Even so, forcing Sasha to divulge his precious secret would have made me feel awful. Perhaps it was just an extension of pirate games, but it was still covert

information that the locals had proudly kept to themselves. My position as a new member of the lord's family didn't give me the right to throw my weight around and insist.

Could it be that Lord Simeon foresaw this development? Was that why he gave permission for me to come here today?

"Your husband also told me not to let anyone go near it if I could help. He seems to be planning something right now, so he made me agree to a few different things. All in all, I don't know if I want to risk it."

This piqued my interest. "What else did he ask you to do? Was it something other than the crates and the search for Alice?"

Sasha glanced at Lionel. I nodded in response to his silent question as to whether it was all right to talk about it in Lionel's presence.

"We've already told him basically everything. That said, if it's something that made Lord Simeon swear you to absolute secrecy, don't feel forced to talk about it."

"Hmm, I don't know. I can't exactly go around blurting it out to everyone, but you are his wife. It's probably fine, I think."

"Oh, but you don't need to. It's up to you."

While the two of us stood there in our indecision, Lara came out of her house and said, "Why don't you come in for some tea instead of standing outside talking?"

What a kind offer. It would be nice to have a break after that hike. Already starting to walk towards her, I replied, "Thank you, I'd like that. Sasha, why don't we go inside and—"

But Lionel pulled me back. "Stop." So far he had remained quiet and unobtrusive, but apparently Mr. Self-Important couldn't hold on any longer. "I didn't come here for tea. Take us to this secret hideout of yours right now."

In the face of this arrogant order, Sasha glared back indignantly.

I tried to mediate. "Lionel, we can't force him."

"This girl belongs to the family that rules the island. Don't you have a duty to

obey an order from your masters? House Duchesnay is related by blood as well, so I expect to be shown the respect I deserve. Don't forget how many people on this island owe their livelihoods to my family."

Resolutely ignoring my attempt to stop him, he piled on the pressure even harder. The era when the lord of the territory was an absolute ruler had long since passed, but there were still certain ties of obligation. It was undeniable that the ordinary citizens were in a weaker position even in the present day. With Lionel wielding the power of his own family as well, Sasha could do little to object.

"I demand to see it for myself. Stop making excuses and lead us there right now."

"All right," said Sasha grudgingly.

I sighed. "Lionel, going there is one thing, but we need to take his feelings into account. It's a place that holds a special meaning to the locals. Let's not forget to be respectful to him as well."

"You should know your place, woman!"

"Yes, my place as a member of the main branch of House Flaubert."

If he was going to wield his family name, two could play that game. Anger immediately rose in his eyes. He glared at me, but I responded in kind, undaunted.

Then, unexpectedly, Lionel looked to the side. When I followed his gaze, I saw why. A man had appeared at the top of the hillside path.

The breath caught in my throat as I looked at him. He looked back with his unassuming narrow eyes. His silvery gray hair was the same color as the overcast sky, and his fashionable clothing made him appear very out of place in this rustic fishing village.

I understood why Lionel's whole body had stiffened all of a sudden.

"Mr. Mereaux? Why?"

How long had he been standing there? Sasha, too, appeared to have only just noticed him.

Mr. Mereaux gave a slight bow and walked over to us. “Good morning.”

I quickly grabbed Lionel’s right hand. I feared that if I didn’t, he would immediately run over and confront Mr. Mereaux. He appeared to lack any notion of strategy, of putting on a nonchalant face and quietly taking the measure of his enemy. Lionel grimaced at the man, making no attempt to hide his animosity.

Mr. Mereaux, seeming to notice this, kept his distance when he walked over, stopping before he came too close. Lionel did not try to shake off my grip—perhaps some rational control still remained—but he exuded a dangerous aura, as though he was ready to explode at any moment.

Since I couldn’t count on Lionel enduring for long, I decided that the direct approach was best. “Mr. Mereaux, what are you doing here?”

His answer was similarly lacking in secrecy. “I saw the two of you at the port and followed you here.”

“You followed us? Why?”

“In short, I came to apologize. I can tell from your reaction that you’ve realized I wasn’t telling the truth yesterday. I’d like to say I’m sorry and give you my reasons.”

“Are you talking about Alice?”

“Yes. My dealings with Alice and...the truth about Raoul’s death.”

As soon as Raoul’s name was mentioned, Lionel dashed forward. Though I tried to hold him back, in an instant he had shaken me off and grabbed Mr. Mereaux by the throat. The latter screwed his face up in pain.

“You bastard. You’ve been lying to us all along!”

“Lionel, please,” he choked.

“How did it feel when you watched from the sidelines? When you saw my parents grieving while I tried desperately to uncover the truth? You put on the face of a faithful employee, pretended to know nothing about it, while inside you were sneering at us! Isn’t that right? Tell me!”

In vain, I latched onto Lionel’s arm and tried to pull him away. “Wait, Lionel!

Please, try to restrain yourself!”

I turned to Sasha, silently begging for his help. I definitely couldn’t stop Lionel on my own. This situation required a man’s strength.

Sasha quickly understood what I was asking. He told Lara to stand back, then ran over to us. Although Lionel was taller, his physical strength could not measure up to that of Sasha, who did manual work every day. For all his violent fury, Lionel was actually quite weak, and Sasha pulled him away without difficulty and pinned his arms behind his back.

Mr. Mereaux, now free, put his disarrayed collar back in order as best he could and took a moment to catch his breath. He untied his now crooked cravat and put it in his trouser pocket. The top button of his shirt had come off, and as a result, his normally tightly buttoned collar was open and I could see something hanging from his neck. It was a pendant made with a narrow braided cord from which hung a polished black stone in the shape of a circle.

Onyx again. It must mean something, but I still can’t put my finger on it.

“Your anger is entirely reasonable. I have no right to ask for forgiveness. However, there was a reason I couldn’t tell you at the time no matter how much I wanted to. I’ve come here today to reveal everything. Is there any chance I could ask you to listen to what I have to say? I won’t lie to you anymore, nor do I have any intention of running away. Once you’ve heard my story, I’m willing to submit to any punishment you see fit. I just want you to know the truth first. Please, it’s all I ask.”

He put his hands together and knelted on the ground as though confessing before God. Indeed, just as he said, he looked prepared for any outcome, no matter how grim. However, for some reason this only made my suspicions grow. Somewhere in my head, an alarm bell was ringing.

“Who killed Raoul?” uttered Lionel finally in a low voice. Mr. Mereaux’s attitude seemed to have restored his composure to some degree. He remained calm enough that Sasha let go of his arms—though he watched him carefully and kept him within reach, ready to stop him at a moment’s notice if he lashed out again.

“The only one who witnessed it firsthand was Alice. I only heard the story

from her after the fact. She came here with me. In fact, she's waiting not far from here."

"What!? She's here!?"

"Yesterday I managed to persuade her to join me in confessing the truth. She has promised me that she'll talk. Will you come with me? It won't take long to get there."

He gestured in the direction of the mountains outside the village. The other day I'd been told that a river flowed through a valley there, forming a narrow cove where it met the sea. Apparently, that was where Sasha's ship, the *Phantom*, was hidden—not that there was any great need to hide it in the first place.

"Bring her here instead!" bellowed Lionel. "Why should we have to go to her!?"

"Don't you think we're a bit exposed here? I'd prefer it if as few other people overheard as possible. It could cause a scandal for House Duchesnay, you see. Even the fact that I was not entirely truthful during the investigation should ideally remain private. Is there no way I can ask you to come with me?"

He pleaded with us with a look of great discomfort. The prospect of a scandal that might affect his family caused Lionel to cease objecting. Mr. Mereaux took this opportunity to press even harder.

"It's only natural that you can't trust me. I'd like it if those two came to meet her as well." With a nod, he gestured toward me and Sasha. "They're already aware of the general circumstances, and if the new Mrs. Flaubert is present for the discussion, she'll be able to tell her husband and her grandfather the whole story. The young man's presence should also give you some measure of safety if anything happens, wouldn't you say?"

On the surface, this proposal sounded purely advantageous for us. Lionel didn't flatly refuse, but appeared to be quietly considering it. Certainly, the attitude Mr. Mereaux presented was an accommodating one. It seemed he was making an earnest effort to convince us to hear his story and nothing more. Nonetheless, I couldn't shake my feeling of unease.

Why? What am I missing?

Finally, Lionel replied, “Fine, I’ll go with you. Take me to the woman and then tell me everything.”

With a look of relief, Mr. Mereaux immediately set off, leading the way while Lionel followed. Sasha looked at them, then turned to me, looking for advice.

I couldn’t pinpoint it, but I felt an ill omen. Part of me strongly believed it was better not to go with him. Still, how could I stop Lionel from going? More to the point, why was there a need to stop him in the first place? If I didn’t have a clear reason myself, there was nothing I could possibly say.

I want to know the truth as well. I want to hear what Mr. Mereaux and Alice have to say. What choice do I have but to follow them?

There was one precautionary measure I could take, however. I ran over to Lara, who was watching with quite some bewilderment.

“Sorry to bother you, but I’m wondering if I could leave this with you? It’s started to feel rather heavy.”

I took the bag off my shoulder and held it out for Lara, who was happy to help. “Yes, that’s no bother at all.”

While passing the bag to her, I drew my face in closer and whispered into her ear, speaking in the quietest voice I could muster to ensure neither Lionel nor Mr. Mereaux could hear me.

“I need you to contact the lord’s manor about this. Tell them as quickly as possible.”

She reacted with a loud gasp, but I immediately held up a finger to shush her.

“I need Lord Simeon to know that Mr. Mereaux has been here. Please, you have to hurry.”

I walked away without waiting for an answer. If I lingered too long, my furtive behavior was sure to attract attention. I followed after Lionel and took a surreptitious glance back at Lara. *Please, you have to realize how urgent this is.* I gave her a nod with which I tried to convey the pressing need for her help. She nodded back and ran into her house.

Exchanging a brief glance with Sasha, too, I walked on without saying another word, quickening my pace slightly to catch up to Lionel.

Mr. Mereaux, at the head of the party, was dressed in the same style as always. He wore dapper, lightweight clothes and was not carrying a bag with him, which hopefully ruled out any weapons. Though he was quite slender and lacked Lord Simeon's trained physique, he did not come across as overly weak and feeble either. To look at him, he was an entirely average person.

And yet, there was something different about the way he walked. It wasn't the brisk, strong pace of a military officer. No, it was a cadence that somehow exposed nothing at all. He walked smoothly, quietly, without moving his body any more than was necessary. It could be described as graceful, but it was also unlike the elegance of the people of the royal court. This way of walking was still and silent, as though he was trying to keep himself hidden.

Yes, now that I think about it, it's quite similar to my own gait. When I suppress my presence and blend into the background to avoid being noticed, this is exactly how I walk. I avoid making any large movements or noises that will stand out, instead trying to move stealthily like a shadow. This is like watching myself from the outside.

When he arrived in the village just now and when I met him yesterday, I never noticed him approaching. Until he intentionally made his presence known by speaking, I had no idea he was there. Why is that? Is it really just that I was too embroiled in my own conversations or surrounded by too much hustle and bustle?

A chill ran down my spine. Though I had known he had a connection to the investigation, until now I hadn't thought of him as a particularly unique individual. I'd seen him as fairly ordinary, just as one would expect of a man who ran the local branch of a shipping company. Now it seemed there was more to him than met the eye.

We left the village behind and were fast approaching the mountains. We appeared to be alone there; at this hour, everyone who wasn't in the village was most likely out at sea. There were no children playing nearby, either, perhaps because their parents didn't let them. The only sign of life was a pillar

of smoke rising from a field nearby. I wondered what sort of work was being carried out and whether it was really safe to have a bonfire on such a windy day. The smoke was a strange reddish color.

The grass at our feet grew deeper as Mr. Mereaux led us farther away from civilization. The wind whistled through the branches of the trees and insects hid themselves behind rocks and tree trunks to avoid being blown away.

It's hard to believe that Alice would come to a place like this. From what I've seen of her personality, it would be quite unlike her. Similarly, would she really confess a secret she'd kept for an entire year after a modicum of persuasion from Mr. Mereaux? It would be an awfully sudden change of heart.

The same applies to him, for that matter. It was only yesterday that he went to such great lengths to try and deceive me. If that parasol hadn't been there, and if I hadn't happened to notice it, I'd never have seen through his lies. How can he have put on such a performance without any reservations and then want to come clean like a good little boy the very next day? It's far too sudden.

It's odd. Very, very odd.

My suspicions—and my sense of unease—were growing more intense by the second. Suddenly, I couldn't fend them off anymore and I stopped in place. Sasha, following my lead, stopped as well.

Mr. Mereaux noticed straight away and turned around. "What's the matter? We're almost there."

The powerful sea breeze blew his hair across his face, exposing his ears, which he tended to keep hidden. I again saw the earring he wore in only his left ear.

An onyx earring, bracelet, and pendant.

Since time immemorial, onyx had symbolized ill fortune due to its color, but equally, it was seen as having a protective power. Some saw it as a witch's tool while others treated it as a good luck charm. It was far from rare; it had been mined in all parts of the world. It was also mentioned in all kinds of books—including the one I'd read about Ortan customs and beliefs.

I remembered at last. In that book, it was written that one region of Orta was home to a clan that placed great value on onyx and treated it as an amulet.

Wearing an onyx earring only in the left ear was a trait unique to that clan. It held a special meaning for them beyond mere fashion. They saw it as protecting the wearer's heart.

And—wait! Is that the only Ortan trait I've seen?

I realized there was one more clue: the card he had sent to Lord Simeon. There had been a tiny smudge that made it look like he'd made a mistake when writing the message and then written over it. It was a small additional mark that shouldn't have been there, as though he'd touched the pen to the paper and then immediately lifted it. That, too, was an Ortan trait.

Though the pronunciation and spelling were quite different, Ortan and Lagrangian used the same alphabet. The same applied to Lavian and Easdalian; they were all very similar languages. However, Ortan had certain quirks in its use of punctuation, sometimes making use of symbols that other languages didn't. The prime example of this was the mark they placed at the start of a sentence. The error on the card was the result of him accidentally starting to draw that mark.

What he'd left was scarcely more than a dot, so he probably assumed it didn't look suspicious and there was no need to rewrite the message from scratch. Indeed, though I had noticed the mistake itself, I would never have made the connection to Orta from that alone. It was only in combination with other evidence that his identity had been revealed to me. Now, at last, the truth was staring me in the face.

Mr. Mereaux said, "Is everything all right?"

His voice was gentler than ever. I could hear the smile in his tone. His eyes appeared at ease as well, but they hid something unfathomable. His gaze was one that observed everything, leaving no detail overlooked. What was he seeing?

My legs trembled. I was terrified. I wanted to run from this place and not look back.

Lord Simeon, the one I could rely on to keep me safe, was out of reach. *I need him. If only he were here.*

“You look a little pale. Are you unwell? Or did you see something that upset you, perhaps?”

In front of me was the very man we had been trying to find—the shadow that had been hanging over us since the start of the trip. We had tightened the net, hoping to catch him, but our prey had slipped through and gained the upper hand.

He was the Ortan operative.

Chapter Thirteen

I stood there unable to respond. Instead, Lionel spoke up. “Is that woman really waiting nearby?”

I was sure he had no idea about who Mr. Mereaux really was, but he at least realized what an odd situation this was.

“I can’t imagine her ever setting foot in a place like this—a forest without even a proper footpath. She’d make a big fuss about her dress getting dirty and there being insects everywhere. You’re still trying to trick us, aren’t you? What are you planning? Are you going to kill all three of us and bury us here!?”

In spite of Lionel’s ferocious gaze, Mr. Mereaux did not yield an inch. At this point, he discarded the mask of the obedient office clerk and stared back with great self-possession. A smile formed on his lips. “My my, what an impatient man you are. Killing you now would only make for a terrible mess to clean up.”

“What did you say!?”

“You seem to have completely misunderstood me. I don’t like killing people. Corpses are so ugly. There’s nothing I hate more than inanimate lumps of meat splattering blood everywhere. Both people and animals are far more charming when they’re alive. That’s why I try to avoid killing as much as possible.”

He spoke in an easygoing manner, ignoring the tension in the air. Even while saying he didn’t like killing, he was making it clear by implication that he had committed murder more than once. His words held a threat that he could kill us at any time—he simply didn’t feel like it.

This unsettling suggestion seemed clear to Lionel as well. A question was wrung from his throat in an even deeper voice than usual. “Did you kill Raoul?”

Mr. Mereaux shook his head. “Me? Oh, no, not at all. He simply fell from the cliff, as you’re well aware.”

“Don’t you dare try to feign ignorance!”

“I swear to you, it’s the truth. In no way did I put my hands on him. All I did was fire a few shots toward his feet. Yes, no more than that. He staggered and fell of his own accord.”

Struck dumb, Lionel was practically choking on his own anger. I charged at him, pushing with my whole body to try and keep him where he was. “You mustn’t! You don’t know who he is! He’s an Ortan operative!”

“Shut up! Get out of my way!”

“Stop! Sasha, help, please!”

With a look of surprise, Sasha immediately joined me in desperately trying to hold Lionel back. Meanwhile, Mr. Mereaux watched us with a look of faint amusement.

“Are you sure?” asked Sasha. “An Ortan operative? Him?”

At the very same moment, Lionel growled, “He’s worked for us for ten years!”

But I shook my head. “I’m afraid it’s true. He was given the mission of infiltrating Lagrange and working undercover. He cunningly hid his origins and blended in well enough to earn your trust.”

I knew another man who was described as an intelligence operative or a spy. Even though he spent far shorter periods of time undercover, his methods were the same. He adapted perfectly to the situation, appearing to fulfill exactly the role expected of him, while in the background he was stealing treasures and digging for information.

Lord Simeon had said there was a strong chance that a spy had infiltrated the Duchesnay Shipping Company. It would be the smoothest way to facilitate the smuggling operation—and, as the head of the local branch, Mr. Mereaux would have been able to do far more than a bottom-rung laborer or crewman. The idea that he was the spy was entirely logical.

Still, I can understand why it’s difficult for Lionel to believe it. If someone has worked for you for many years, and you’ve come to trust them, you’d never consider that they might be working against you. Even after finding out that he had some involvement with Raoul’s death, I didn’t make the connection that he was Ortan.

“So you did figure it out. And there I was thinking I was doing such a good job. You’re far smarter than you look, you know. I wonder what gave the game away. Were you able to tell your husband, too?”

Two men stepped out from behind the trees near Mr. Mereaux and started coming toward us. They both held guns of a smaller variety than I’d seen so far, with shorter barrels. Despite having never seen them before, I could tell—as could the others, no doubt—that these were intended for short-range use. They would be able to take aim and fire more quickly than was possible with a musket. Being targeted with one of these at such close distance would leave no room for escape. Even Lionel understood the danger and stopped trying to run forward.

“After you visited my office yesterday, I noticed some strange goings-on. A lot of snooping around, like I was being watched. Had you already realized who I was at that point?”

He noticed we were keeping an eye on him? How frustrating. I thought we were doing such a good job as well.

“Women can be quite formidable! You put on such a look of innocence all the while. Did you inform your husband straight away? The only thing I don’t understand is how you connected Alice’s presence at the office to my true identity.”

I still could not form any words in response. He walked over to one of his comrades and pulled out an additional gun holstered at the man’s waist, then held it up in his right hand and aimed it at us, just like the other two.

“Well, we can discuss the particulars later. Since there’s no longer a need to continue putting on a performance, we can come to the point. The cargo that was taken from the *Decoration* is hidden nearby, yes? That ‘pirate’ there decided to follow in the footsteps of his ancestor and brought them here, intending to give them to the lord of the island. Isn’t that right?”

He spoke with a lightly mocking tone as he turned the barrel of the gun toward Sasha. No surprise that he knew about Sasha’s background given how long he had lived on the island.

“I happened to overhear some mention of the cargo having been secretly

moved last night. According to that information, it was taken somewhere else, but that sounded somewhat unlikely to me. That was a trap to lure me out, wasn't it? I'm certain the truth is that it's hidden here, near your village."

This was the first I'd heard about any trap. However, based on what Sasha had said just now in the village, I could guess what had happened. Lord Simeon had asked him to start spreading false rumors so that they would reach Mr. Mereaux's ears.

Wait a moment. Does that mean Lord Simeon already knows that he's an Ortan operative? Since when? The only other possibility is that he set a trap while not even knowing that.

"Would you be so kind as to lead me to the hideout? Oh, and naturally, we don't intend to leave empty-handed. We have to take a little souvenir."

Silently, Sasha glanced at me with confusion in his golden eyes. Indeed, it was mysterious to me as well. As far as we knew, that cargo had been meant as a way to frame House Flaubert. It had no significant value of its own that justified stealing the contents, which amounted to some old guns that were not classified at all. Why were they so interested?

But what if some classified weaponry was mixed in as well? If Sasha and his men hadn't attacked the Decoration, the Ortans' plan was to receive the goods at Cours port and report the "smuggling" at that point. However, they'd have been able to remove anything they wanted from the cargo before doing so. Perhaps they had included something classified and planned to kill two birds with one stone.

If so, it went without saying that we couldn't let them have their way. It was a rather sticky situation, however. Given the guns pointed at us, we couldn't exactly raise any objections.

With searching eyes, Sasha looked at me for guidance. I responded with a small nod. If we tried to fight back when we had no hope of winning, there was no way of telling what might happen. For now, all we could do was obey.

Sasha turned back to Mr. Mereaux and said, "Fine, I'll take you there. But after you find what you're looking for, let us go, all right? When you're finished doing whatever you're doing, you don't have to kill us."

“Yes, very well. As I said, I don’t especially like killing. Besides, I have to leave the island either way, since I’ve been discovered. All that remains after this is for me to return home. I don’t need to silence you.”

His prompt agreement did nothing to reassure me. I was sure the same applied to Sasha and Lionel. This man’s words meant very little at this stage.

If we pretend to quietly obey him, I wonder if we’ll be able to find an opening at some point. Maybe there’ll be some opportunity for us to run away.

Sasha said simply, “This way.” He began to lead, while Lionel and I followed with guns poking into our backs. The forest grew thicker and we found ourselves surrounded by darkness even though it was not yet noon. Not only did the trees obstruct the light, the sky itself was also growing ever more overcast with dark clouds. The heavens threatened to open at any moment. The wind driving against us was also heavy and damp.

The ground was steeply inclined with a lot of underbrush. Walking was a struggle, and I quickly grew out of breath. I tripped several times. Despite my best efforts, I was slowing the progress of the group. At one point, Mr. Mereaux’s two companions turned to me with looks of annoyance. Mr. Mereaux himself told them to calm down and reassured me with his usual politeness, but I didn’t feel the slightest bit of real kindness or amiability in his words. An unsettling chill lurked in his smile. I refused the hand he offered me and kept walking with fresh determination.

The sound of running water grew steadily closer until we finally left the forest and reached the valley. Sasha led us alongside the edge of the valley, climbing further and further upward. Although the valley wasn’t overly deep, it was still far down enough that jumping would not have been safe. However, it gradually became shallower as we climbed, to the point that it could barely even be called a valley. The route we walked along also became more of a dry riverbed strewn with rocks, the stream itself practically a trickle. Here it was even harder to walk than in the forest. There were so many hazards scattered around my feet that I began to stumble more and more.

Lionel noticed my unsteadiness and took my hand. I hadn’t expected assistance from him of all people, so I looked up in surprise. Our eyes met just

for a second before he turned away without saying a word. There was nothing rough or violent about the hand that helped me along and pulled me up every time I was about to fall. I felt a great deal of warmth from him, as though perhaps he was kinder than he had seemed at first.

Maybe he really had just been pushed to his limit. Raoul's death was so painful that he couldn't help being full of doubts and accusations wherever he turned.

Now the man who had killed his beloved brother was right before his eyes, yet he could neither capture him nor do anything to fight back. On the contrary, he might have been about to face his own death. It must have been unspeakably frustrating for him. I, too, wished I could do something to turn the tables and avenge Raoul's death. However, we had three opponents, each equipped with a gun.

If Lord Simeon were here, would he be able to defeat them? As strong as he is, I have my doubts. Surely even he wouldn't be able to combat three men with guns.

We had been walking for more than thirty minutes since leaving the village. That seemed like enough time for Lara's message to have reached the lord's manor, but I couldn't be sure how long it would take for it to then reach Lord Simeon, and for him to get here.

This does feel like a long way, though. Has Sasha deliberately chosen a longer route in order to stall for time? It's also a rather demanding walk. Perhaps he knew that I wouldn't be able to keep up, making it take even longer? He's walking slowly as well—perhaps only under the pretense of adjusting for my speed. In reality, he might be waiting for reinforcements to arrive.

If so, it was actually better for me not to try too hard. I considered whether I could even ask to take a break. I was huffing and puffing so hard that I was sure it would seem plausible.

With such perfect timing that it was as if he had read my thoughts, one of the Ortan operatives said, "I can't believe this is taking so long."

I drew back in fright, but it was Sasha he glared at.

“I hope you’re not trying any funny business.”

Sasha stopped and turned around. “Really? Are you worn out as well? It’s a pirate’s hideout. Of course it’s not going to be easy to get to. It’s not much farther to go, anyway.”

Mr. Mereaux held his comrade back and asked, “How much longer?” There was a pointed look in his eye. He had most likely picked up on the possibility that Sasha was purposely wasting time.

“Hmm, if we’re quick, it shouldn’t take more than another five minutes. We should just be starting to hear the waterfall, I reckon.”

“There’s a waterfall nearby? I don’t hear anything.”

I strained my ears, but I couldn’t hear it either, just the sounds of the wind and the stream—and those being made by our assembled group.

“Yes,” Sasha replied, “just upstream from here. There’s where the hideout is. I don’t think the lady’s going to make it that long, though. We should let her take a rest.”

Mr. Mereaux took a brief look at me and shook his head. “It’s begun to rain. If we stay here and rest, we’ll get soaked. Could I ask you to keep going for another five minutes? When we get there, I’ll let you rest for as long as you want.”

What does he mean by that?

Sasha and Lionel both reacted with looks of strong displeasure. Even so, we were in no position to make demands, so we did what we were told and proceeded along the dry riverbed. One by one, raindrops started to land on my cheeks, and in no time at all they were growing bigger and more numerous. A low rumble sounded above our heads.

I’d rather not be walking along a riverbed during a rainstorm. Just because I’ve had a privileged upbringing doesn’t mean I know nothing about the outside world. I’ve read plenty of adventure chronicles, after all.

I was scared of the danger that awaited us, but the forces of nature were terrifying as well. I mustered all the strength I could and kept going.

Just as Sasha had said, we didn't have to go much farther before we could hear rushing water in the distance. We made our way around a large boulder and under some overhanging branches, then clambered over another boulder, and suddenly the path opened up before us and we were being soaked by something other than the rain. Amongst the surrounding greenery, a wall of water towered over us.

It was an impressive sight. Though it wasn't overly wide, only perhaps the width of an adult man's outstretched arms, it fell from a height as tall as the palace. The water crashing against the basin sprayed up and covered the area with a fine white mist.

His goal finally within reach, Mr. Mereaux wore a look of relief. "And it's here, by the waterfall? Where, though? I don't see an entrance."

On both sides of the waterfall stood nothing but more woods; there was no sign of any buildings. The operatives glowered at Sasha. However, I knew that he hadn't led them astray. Lord Simeon had told me it was a secret cave and that the entrance was hidden from view. *I know exactly where the entrance will be.*

Sasha began to climb up the right-hand side. "You're spies, aren't you? You must have some idea. Look, it's behind here."

He stood close to the cascading water and beckoned them with his hand. Then he walked behind the waterfall.

"Aha, I see."

Nodding, Mr. Mereaux urged me and Lionel to follow. I followed in Sasha's footsteps and timidly peered behind the water. Indeed, there was a hole large enough for people to descend into.

I've read about things like this, but it's still hard to believe I'm seeing one with my own eyes.

Inevitably, the waterfall splashed onto me as I walked past. Now I was soaking wet, but I had been nearly that anyway with the rain falling so hard. With a grunt of effort, I jumped into the cave. The hole was not especially deep, so I landed safely. Inside, I could see piles of wooden crates. The bad weather

meant that not much light penetrated into the cave, so it was fairly dark near the entrance, and deeper inside it was almost pitch black. The wet floor was slippery underfoot, so I had to walk with great care.

Squinting, I saw that what I'd thought was the end of the cave actually had a narrow opening. I wondered if it was possible to go even deeper into the cave, but with so little light, it was impossible to know for sure.

After directing the three of us to sit together in one spot close to the entrance, Mr. Mereaux set his men to work opening the crates one by one.

"Hey, now's our chance," said Lionel in a voice so slight it was hard to make out even though I was right next to him. I moved only my eyes to look at him. With his gaze and a slight turn of the face, Lionel gestured at Mr. Mereaux and the two men investigating the crates' contents.

"Those two have put their guns down. We can all jump on Hector at once and take the guns."

"No, don't. That's too risky." Sasha looked back and forth between Lionel and the men deeper inside the cave.

I started to grow anxious that we were drawing too much attention to ourselves.

Insistently, Sasha added, "Just wait a bit longer."

"What good will waiting do? They're going to kill us."

"I know what you're saying, but just wait. We can't use the guns in the crates, anyway. They're not loaded. That Flaubert bloke took the bullets out on his first day here."

Trust Lord Simeon to be cautious. Sensible as that was, it means we can't use those guns to fight back. Not that I want to fire a gun, of course. I really don't! I wouldn't even know how! Though I'm sure Sasha would.

"All the more reason to strike now. If we can just put Hector out of action, we can win."

Lionel's voice was getting louder. In panic, I put a hand up to try and shush him. At that same moment, one of the two men digging through the crates

suddenly spoke.

“What’s this? I’ve never seen a gun like it before! It’s brand new!”

He had picked up what appeared to a handgun. With the distance and the poor lighting, I couldn’t see it very well, nor could I distinguish new guns from old ones in the first place. However, their excitement was genuine.

Was classified technology mixed in with the other guns after all? If so, surely Lord Simeon could have just taken out this one single handgun instead of leaving it there with the others. It’s not like Lord Simeon to make an oversight like that. Curious indeed.

I tilted my head in confusion. Mr. Mereaux, his attention distracted by the other two men, stepped toward them. The gun he had been aiming precisely toward us was now facing in a different direction.

At that moment, something cut through the air in the distant darkness. The object hit Mr. Mereaux in the hand and knocked the gun out of it. What rolled onto the floor was a stone about the size of a clenched fist. In their surprise, the other two had no time to prepare themselves before a shadow emerged from out of the darkness and hit them both. In an instant, they were knocked out, one lying flat out and the other colliding with the wall.

Sasha reached out for Mr. Mereaux’s gun, which had fallen to the ground. Before Sasha could grab it, Mr. Mereaux struck him with a kick—but he couldn’t pick it up himself, for another blow from the side sent him crashing down.

He groaned and crumpled to the ground, apparently unable to stand. The impact looked to be quite severe. “Why? How did you get here?”

The one standing before him kicked the gun in Sasha’s direction. “I was expecting you elsewhere, but you never arrived. Though I spent a while waiting for you to fall into my trap, I naturally foresaw an alternative possibility where you saw through it.”

That dignified voice and broad shoulders. That blond hair, shining brightly even in the darkness of the cave. Relief surged through my body. This isn’t an illusion, is it? Lord Simeon is really here, isn’t it? It’s actually true! Yes, God!

More men followed him through the opening in the far wall. Though the hole

was narrow enough that only one person could pass through at a time, it was evidently wide enough on the other side that several could hide there.

When Sasha was looking in that direction, was he waiting for Lord Simeon to give a signal? Hold on, though. That means he came here knowing all along that Lord Simeon would be hiding inside. That can't possibly be the case—can it?

The men who had appeared from the opening were wearing military uniforms. Specifically, they were members of the navy. They picked up the two unconscious men and restrained their hands with ropes before doing the same to Mr. Mereaux.

After first confirming that they were all firmly under control, Lord Simeon finally turned to me. He walked over and helped me up. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” I replied, “but I am full of questions.” He spent a moment looking me over to ensure I was really unharmed, and I added, “There are all sorts of things I’d like to know, but hadn’t you better secure the classified technology first?”

When I pointed toward the crates, Lord Simeon glanced in that direction with a remarkably casual air. “Ah, yes.” One of the naval officers picked up the weapon that the Ortans had been so excited about and passed it to him. “Thank you. Don’t worry, however. There’s nothing classified about it. It’s an old model.”

He put the gun straight into his breast pocket. Did he really not need to hand it over to the military? “But the man said he’d never seen one like it.”

“He wouldn’t have. The military has never used a weapon that looks like this. It was made to order especially for my grandfather.”

Mr. Mereaux looked up at us. “What?”

Lord Simeon glanced back at him only for a second and then nonchalantly explained, “I envisioned a scenario where we could use people from our side as bait to draw Mereaux in. Even if my grandfather is the lord of the island, personal possession of a brand new variety of firearm would never be permitted. This is an old gun. It’s had some decorative elements added so that it looks different from the others, but inside the construction is exactly the same. It has no enhanced capabilities at all.”

My eyes narrowed. “So you used *us* as bait, essentially?”

“Not at all!” He hurriedly shook his head. “I would never use *you* as bait, of course. I only ever intended to use Sasha.”

“Hey!”

The voice of complaint that rose up next to me was ignored.

“I’m merely explaining that I had imagined this as a valid possibility. The reason I left the crates here was rather that it seemed they might come in useful as a means to lure in the Ortans. Rather than bringing them to the lord’s manor, I hid the decoy gun amongst the others. It needn’t have come into play at all—I certainly had no intention that it would—but this was how events played out, in the end.”

The false rumors he had leaked on purpose in order to deceive Mr. Mereaux must have included some hints that something classified was amongst the weapons here. Mr. Mereaux hadn’t necessarily been in direct contact with the people who’d sent the crates, so he might have thought there was a breakdown in communication about the contents.

His entire mission had been to steal advanced weaponry from Lagrange. Now he had been unmasked and forced to withdraw—essentially, he had failed in his task. Even knowing it might be a trap, he couldn’t have simply left this cargo where it was without checking it. His goal had been so close he could nearly taste it.

When he had said he had to take a souvenir, that was very true indeed. He had been backed into a corner. He had seen through Lord Simeon’s trap and tried to outsmart him, but Lord Simeon had anticipated that possibility as well and been able to change his plans accordingly. It had been a battle of wits where each side tried to outflank the other, but the ultimate victor had been Lord Simeon.

All the strength drained from me. *My goodness, how can he have planned so far in advance? It’s ridiculous! But after all, he was that sort of person. Only, I feel like an idiot for misunderstanding. Of course there couldn’t have been classified weapons technology here that Lord Simeon happened to overlook. I should have known otherwise as soon as I heard about it.*

Hanging my head in dejection, I rested my hands on the body in front of me. *I am thoroughly exhausted. Please support me for a moment. I need you to be a wall.*

“Are you definitely all right? You’re awfully wet. Are you sure you don’t have a fever?”

“I’m fine. I’ve never even had a cold in my entire life. I’m just worn out, that’s all. I want to fall asleep right here.”

“If you fall asleep when you’re soaked through, even you’ll catch a cold.”

He took off his jacket and wrapped it around me. The body heat remaining in it warmed my cold limbs. I gently leaned against his chest. Though he didn’t embrace me passionately because there were other people watching, his arms surrounded me with gentle reassurance. Being close to him warmed me even further and made the tension flow out of me. *It’s all right. Everything’s fine, now.* The feel of his body against mine filled me joy and relief to my very depths.

The rain was still falling, but it seemed as though the cave was growing brighter. Sasha pointed toward the sky and said, “Look, the weather’s clearing up. The strong wind’s blowing the clouds away.”

A patch of clear blue peeked out of one part of the cloudy sky. The rain rapidly became lighter as more rays of sun broke through the gray. The surrounding woods were bathed in the glow of sparkling dew, and the creatures hiding in the shadows of leaves and trees began to move again.

We left the cave and walked along the riverbed, which was now rather wet and muddy. The crates and guns had been left where they were for now as it wasn’t practical to move them, but Lord Simeon said he would send some men to retrieve them soon.

“So much for my secret,” groaned Sasha. He was far from thrilled that the cave’s existence had become known to so many outside parties.

“I’ll ask them not to tell anyone,” Lord Simeon replied.

“I don’t know if that’ll work. I just hope it doesn’t get mobbed by tourists, at least.”

To return, we had to walk the same path we had come by. In my worn-out state, the rocky riverbed was even more of a struggle than before. At one point I staggered and both Lord Simeon and Lionel stretched a hand out to catch me at the same time. Lord Simeon and I looked at Lionel in surprise, prompting him to rapidly pull his hand away, turn in a different direction, and walk on ahead of us.

We shared a private moment of laughter. *I wonder if Lionel remembers barging into me when we first met. He probably didn't intend to knock me over like that, but even so, this is a complete transformation of his personality. I bet this kind and helpful version of Lionel is his true self.*

When we had to climb back over the large boulder, Lord Simeon lifted me up and carried me. Holding me in one arm, he used the other to grip onto the rock face and climbed with ease. Everyone's eyes became saucers. *Yes, I can understand the shock. He may look like a princely aristocrat, but underneath he's well-muscled.*

Not long afterward, Sasha suddenly stopped and said, "Not that way. This way."

He pointed out a different route than the one we had taken on the way there. Indeed, it seemed he had deliberately gone the long way around. We promptly left the riverbed behind and made our way in amongst the trees. Initially this was still difficult to traverse, but we soon reached a narrow path—not a game trail, but a proper road built by humans.

I had to scramble over all those rocks when this was here all along! What was the point of all my efforts!?

Thanks to this, the rest of the return journey was quite comfortable, and we were back in the village much sooner than I had expected.

Further along the path, at a point between two fields, another group of naval officers stood next to several carriages. The team waiting here on standby and the team that had gone with Lord Simeon amounted to ten men in total. Six of them, two per operative, started dragging the Ortans into the carriages, but as they did so, Lionel asked them to wait.

"Before you drag him away, make him spit it out. Why did he kill Raoul? If

these people really are Ortan spies, what did they need to kill Raoul for?" He glowered at Mr. Mereaux with a gaze so sharp it could have stabbed him. "Tell me right now!"

Mr. Mereaux barely reacted at all. His face remained apathetic. Lord Simeon looked at both of them, took a breath, then answered.

"On the whole, your guess was not far off the mark. I don't know the exact details, but Raoul must have learned about the smuggling operation somehow. After that, they needed to silence him."

All remained silent, so he continued.

"Alice Cernay was Mereaux's accomplice. She was an actress by trade, so she would have had opportunities to mingle with important people from the world of business and politics. From the records at the port, we were able to ascertain that she has visited the island on numerous occasions. She was probably acting as a mule."

I hadn't heard this expression before, so I couldn't help asking. "A mule?"

"As you might imagine, it refers to the people whose role is to carry the goods during transportation. At Sans-Terre or whichever port she was boarding at, she kept the items she'd been given in her hand luggage, ready to hand it over when she reached her destination. Hand luggage isn't checked too rigorously for journeys that don't leave Lagrangian territory, especially for passengers staying in first class or premium cabins. This made her exceptionally well suited to being a mule. Raoul was very fond of this island, so he came here rather often—bringing his lover with him."

I let out a quiet breath. It all made sense. If she was traveling with a member of the family whose company ran the ship, she'd have been given special treatment while boarding. Her luggage had probably never been inspected at all.

I suspected the argument she and Raoul had shortly before he died had been about exactly that. He had happened to see something illicit in her bags and demanded to know what she was doing.

Then she had run off to Mr. Mereaux. He'd decided that if Raoul was the only

one who knew, it was still possible to cover it up. He would have pretended he wanted to discuss the matter in order to lure Raoul to the cliff and murder him.

“Wherever foreign operatives infiltrate, they find accomplices there and put them to work. There are many cases where the accomplices themselves are tricked into doing it and aren’t even aware that they’re being used, but in all likelihood, Alice Cernay knew full well. She traveled to the island alone on several occasions, which would never have been possible otherwise. Her financial means are clear from the way she dresses—she’s not someone who could purchase a first class ticket multiple times in one year. It was probably Mereaux who paid her fares.”

I was used to seeing Lord Simeon as someone entirely indifferent to women’s fashion. As far as I knew, he had no idea whether any given dress was good or bad. And yet, he had shown a great deal of discernment here. Alice followed fashion and always dressed to impress, but the standard of her clothes was different from that of a wealthier woman. He had picked up on that despite only meeting her a handful of times.

“I see,” croaked Lionel, his voice barely audible. Glaring at Mr. Mereaux, he balled his hand into a fist so tight that even his shoulders shook. “Is this true? You and the woman deceived Raoul and then killed him?”

In the face of this intense rage, Mr. Mereaux still remained unflappable. He looked back at Lionel with cool indifference and snorted. “What did I tell you earlier? I didn’t kill him. All I did was threaten him with a few gunshots directed at his feet. He fell from the cliff on his own.”

Lionel let out a growl.

“It was such a disappointment for me, too. He was such a reliable accomplice. Raoul himself was far more useful than Alice. There was nowhere he couldn’t go as long as a Duchesnay ship could sail there. He said so many times that he loved being able to go on as many voyages as he wanted without ever paying a fare. Yes, he adored traveling. Why, I’m sure if I’d so much as mentioned Orta to him, he’d have immediately been bursting with curiosity and headed straight there.”

A laugh rang in his throat. With a scornful sneer, he had made it clear that he

had used Raoul as an accomplice as well. Was this an effort to get what little revenge he could? He had intentionally said something that was sure to rub us the wrong way.

Lionel couldn't restrain himself any longer. He barged past the naval officers and grabbed Mr. Mereaux. Lord Simeon reached out to try and pull him away, but before he could, Lionel let out a shriek and fell to the ground. He lay there and moaned, a pool of red forming around him. Mr. Mereaux, who should have been restrained, was suddenly free, the rope dropping to his feet in pieces. The naval officers leapt into action, but he was too quick for them. He slipped past them and swung his arm. Blood sprayed out again.

Does he have a hidden blade!? He was given a full body search, wasn't he? Where on earth did he hide something like that?

He evaded Lord Simeon as well. In the cave he had been taken by surprise and subdued immediately, but in a real fight, he was terrifyingly nimble, excelling in speed rather than power. Dodging every attack from Lord Simeon, he ran toward me. Before I knew it, I was subjected to another dreadful shock.

"Marielle!"

One of his arms coiled around me like a whip, gripping me tightly. He applied so much force that I couldn't move a muscle. Even breathing was painful. I didn't know why at first, but his other hand took my glasses and threw them off. An instant later, something sharp was pointing at me less than an inch from my eyeball.

Isn't that his bracelet? Only, it's shaped differently. Did it have a blade hidden inside it?

Lord Simeon had been running toward us, but he froze in place. From behind me, Mr. Mereaux spoke in an ingratiating tone. "Indeed, I'd suggest not coming any closer, or your lovely wife is going to lose an eye."

Lord Simeon, Sasha, and the naval officers—not one of them moved a muscle.

"Now, could I ask you to let my two companions go, please? Or is your wife not worth that much?"

Still staring fixedly toward me, Lord Simeon silently waved his hand. The naval

officers untied the other two operatives' ropes.

The freed pair took all the weapons held by the naval officers and joined us. They threw the pesky sabers into the river and kept hold of only the guns before starting down the path to the port.

Mr. Mereaux followed, using me as a shield and issuing a threat to everyone present. "I realize I may be asking the impossible, but I'd like it so much if you didn't follow us. I would prefer to avoid hurting her. If you let us go without making any fuss, I promise I'll treat her well."

I wished I could do something. The operatives were being allowed to escape because of me. But the blade pointed at my eye had left me too petrified to make a sound. If he had moved his hand even the slightest bit, it would have stabbed directly into my eyeball.

As a way of holding me hostage, this was more effective than a threat to kill me. If I died, I would lose all value as a hostage. That was why such threats often turned out to be empty ones. This way, I would remain alive and continue to serve a purpose.

He was different from impulsive criminals. He had no doubt been trained in exactly how to handle this sort of situation. Mr. Mereaux and his comrades were skilled at their work, and Lord Simeon knew this, which was why he wasn't coming after them at this inopportune moment.

Sasha started to give chase, but Lord Simeon stopped him and simply watched from the top of the slope. I couldn't see very well with my blurry vision, but I knew he was staring straight at me.

He wouldn't just abandon me. Right now, he's trying his absolute hardest to think of a way to rescue me. I believe that without a shadow of a doubt—but how on earth is it going to be possible?

Once he had opened up enough distance, Mr. Mereaux lowered the blade. He pulled me along with him and ran down the hill so fast that he was practically flying. The villagers we passed along the way were shocked and wondered what was going on, but I had no time to even try asking for help. In moments, we were back at the port.

It seemed they had originally come here by sea, as they ran without hesitation to a small fishing boat. It was only *disguised* as a fishing boat, of course—it was actually intended to serve an entirely different purpose. Once on board, I could see neither any fish nor any nets anywhere.

Looking at the blood sticking to his bracelet and his hands, Mr. Mereaux spat, “Ugh, what a mess. I cannot stand this. This is why I dislike spilling blood.”

I hoped Lionel and the naval officers were all right. I didn’t think it would be possible to cause life-threatening injuries with such a small blade, but it depended on where he had cut them.

They quickly unmoored the boat and unfurled the sails. The ship was soon well away from the wharf and no pursuers had yet shown themselves.

“Apologies, you may find it a little cramped, but could you please go in here for now?”

He opened a sort of trapdoor in the deck. On a real fishing boat, the compartment at the bottom of the boat would probably have been stuffed full of fish. Instead of that, I could make out a person inside. A woman. All I could see were her feet and the hem of her skirt, but she seemed to be lying there on her side.

When the trapdoor opened, she jumped in fright and her feet moved. *Oh, thank goodness. She’s still alive.*

I was pushed through the hole and could soon see the inside of the compartment more clearly. My fellow prisoner was Alice, fully bound and gagged.

Chapter Fourteen

The space was more expansive than I expected. Even with my arrival, there was still a bit of room to move around. I couldn't stand, but it was deep enough for me to sit up. The closed trapdoor still left gaps for light to enter, so Alice and I could see one another.

I drew nearer to her and removed her gag. "Are you all right?"

She took a large, relieved breath, but instead of answering my question, she turned away in a huff. *She's still herself. I'm glad to see that, at least.*

I set about untying the rope that bound her hands behind her back. "Ugh, it's tied so tightly."

I recalled my previous experience of grappling with a knot this tough. *Why do men have to tie knots so ridiculously tightly? My brother is the same when he screws on a jam jar lid. All it does is make it more difficult to undo later!*

"Ouch! Honestly, this is far more difficult than it needs to be."

I applied as much force to my index finger as I could to try and work a hole into the knot. I wasn't in as much of a rush as I had been the last time—this time, it looked like I might just barely be able to untie it with a bit of time and effort. Moving carefully to be certain I wouldn't catch any fingernails, I patiently weakened the knot.

"What are you doing?" groaned Alice.

"Untying you, of course. It looks painful being trussed up like this, and I'm sure it's annoying for you not being able to move."

She let out a mocking snort. "There's nobody watching. You don't have to pretend to be a good little girl. I know you think it serves me right, seeing me in this embarrassing state. Just be honest and laugh at me, you two-faced harridan!"

"This is certainly no time to be laughing."

I ignored her and continued with my work. Her reaction was only to be expected. Alice wouldn't suddenly turn into my friend.

It's quite all right. I've received more than my fair share of insults and backhanded comments. This isn't enough to make me flinch.

"Ah, it's coming undone! Just a little bit more."

"Why even bother? You know they're going to kill us anyway, don't you? It's all worthless." As she spoke, she began to cry.

I stopped moving my hands and looked her in the eye. "Couldn't you have realized the risks involved at some earlier point?"

She trembled but did not say a word.

"If you'd thought properly about what you were doing, you'd have known that it wasn't going to end peacefully. When Raoul was murdered, didn't you realize the same might happen to you one day?"

"What would you know!?"

Though she was still not yet freed, Alice sat up and glared at me, her cheeks wet with tears. Quite honestly, she came across as less furious and more pathetic.

"You don't know anything about me! You've never had to work for anything!" She sobbed convulsively like a child. "Despite how ugly you are, your background means you've been showered with beautiful clothes! You haven't suffered for a day in your life! You won a husband you don't deserve and you go around proudly showing him off like the arrogant trollop you are! If I only had fancier dresses and more jewels, I'd be the one attracting men of that caliber!"

The beautiful face she treasured so much had become sodden with tears. Though she was so fixated on appearances, she had lost all ability to think about her own as she let out all the vitriol she had built up.

"I put in so much work. All along I thought, I just need to stand out a tiny bit more, become a tiny bit more famous. But working hard at my acting craft wasn't enough. I had to stand out beyond that, or I'd never win the favor of the troupe leader, the manager, and the audience. Being shabby was not

acceptable!”

I let her continue without interrupting.

“I felt wretched, but I carried on doing everything I possibly could. The only one who noticed me, who accepted me, was Raoul. The fact that he belonged to House Duchesnay had an appeal of its own, of course, but it wasn’t that I was purely after his fortune. What made me happy was that he wasn’t looking at any other woman, but at me. Only, then he found out that I was working as a mule. It made him really angry. I’d been told that if I got caught I’d be arrested, and I didn’t want Raoul to dump me either. I didn’t have anyone to turn to except Hector, and when I did...”

Bit by bit her intensity weakened and she hung her head, her shoulders quivering.

“I didn’t want to kill Raoul. That was the last thing I wanted!”

I frowned. “You were interviewed as part of the investigation, weren’t you? Why didn’t you tell the truth?”

“I could never have done that!” She raised her head again and scowled at me. However, I didn’t think this was a look of anger or hatred, but one imploring me to somehow save her. “I knew exactly what would happen if I did. I’d have been arrested, tried, and sent to prison. How could I have confessed knowing that!?”

She struck me as a very selfish and childish person. After causing a horrible crime to be committed, her top priority had been her own self-preservation.

It would have been easy to criticize her for that. Alice had made a number of very bad choices. However, I felt the genuine emotion in her wish that Raoul hadn’t died.

“I couldn’t say a word about it, but I felt incredibly guilty about Raoul. That was why I came here to visit his grave. I was worried about what Hector might think of me, but I was sure Raoul would have been glad that I brought his brother. I wanted to at least do something.”

I sighed internally. *It would be better not to tell Lionel that. She might have meant this visit as a form of atonement, but he would no doubt see it as an outrage. It’s as though she doesn’t even acknowledge that she was the one who*

drove Raoul to his death—or how selfish her reasons have been all along.

I stopped talking and went back to untying the rope. There was no point in arguing with Alice. More important was to try and think of something I could do to help.

I'm sure Lord Simeon will come after us. He'll do whatever he needs to do to save me. In the meantime, I have to gain a full understanding of the situation and be ready to move at any moment.

I eventually managed to untie the knot and free Alice's hands. Her face screwed up in pain from being bound for so long and finally released. She stretched her arms and rubbed her sore wrists.

Just as I was about to tackle the ropes around her feet, the trapdoor opened and Mr. Mereaux peered in. "Untied her, have you? Tsk, tsk. After all the work it took to bring her under control."

He spoke with his usual indifferent attitude, with no overt warnings or threats, but he scared me more than his two comrades, who looked down as well with more menacing eyes. He grinned and used a pleasant, conversational tone to hint at horrifying ideas.

"You needn't have gone to all that effort," he continued. "I'm going to kill her soon enough anyway."

Alice seized up, the breath catching in her throat. It seemed her fear was more powerful than her hatred of me, since she then leaned against me as if holding on for dear life.

"I thought you hated killing," I said.

"I hate spilling blood, certainly. It creates a terrible mess, and cleaning it up afterwards is such a headache. Even strangling someone isn't as clean a method as it appears. Did you know that when a person dies, they void their bowels? That's truly an annoyance. It's even messier and smellier than blood. That's why it's best to throw them into the sea. If you're far enough from land, the fish will deal with the body before it can ever reach dry land, and there'll be no ugly corpse to deal with. Convenient, don't you agree?"

Alice was no longer the only one trembling. It was clear that this was no idle

threat, but a plan he genuinely meant to carry out. This man had absolutely no qualms about taking a life. Just as he had laughed while talking about his murder of Raoul, it seemed he now planned to push us to our deaths with a smile on his lips.

While we cowered in fear, he suddenly raised his eyebrows and clapped his hands. “Ah, but don’t you worry. It’s only Alice I plan to dispose of. I promised your husband I’d treat you well and I intend to keep my word.”

I swallowed hard, unsure how much I believed him.

“I’ll need to keep you as a hostage until we arrive safely in Ortan waters. Even aside from that, I’ve taken a personal liking to you. When we first met I saw you as entirely average—the most dull and ordinary girl imaginable. That was a deception, though, wasn’t it? There was far more to you than that. How did you figure out my true identity? I was certain my cover was impeccable. What was it that let you see through my facade?”

Though he still spoke in a cheerful manner, I had the sense that some genuine annoyance was mixed in with his words. Being caught out by me seemed to have wounded his pride.

His smiling face was demanding an answer. Cautiously, I began.

“Yes, I must admit your deception was very thorough. In particular, your pronunciation is so perfect that I’d never have guessed you were a foreigner. After living on the island for so long and blending in with the populace, you were able to present a very convincing front.”

“I’m glad to hear you say so. That’s exactly what I thought.”

“However, there was a particular Ortan quirk that clued me in. It’s very subtle, so I didn’t pick up on it to begin with. Honestly, it wasn’t until after your arrival in the village that I finally deciphered the mystery of your origins. I’m frustrated with myself for not realizing it sooner.”

“Hmm.” He rested a hand on his chin. “I see, I see. And what exactly was this Ortan quirk of mine?”

“I’m not going to tell you. If I do, you’ll be able to hide it on your next mission. It would be most unfortunate if you no longer had any weak points at all.”

Despite my intense nerves, I replied rather assertively. However, Mr. Mereaux was not annoyed by my response. On the contrary, his smile broadened, and he laughed. “Such intelligence! Such nerves of steel! I’d expected you to proudly announce how you made your deduction, but this is indeed a more prudent choice. You really are nothing like you appear. No wonder your husband is so fond of you. Who could avoid being drawn to you? Killing you would be such a shame. What if I take you back to Orta and subject you to my training? That’s beginning to feel like an enticing prospect.”

His oppressive gaze bore down on me, giving me goosebumps. Although he had told me he wasn’t going to kill me, that did nothing to calm my nerves whatsoever.

I really, really don’t want this man to take me away with him. Who knows what I’ll be forced to endure? Please, no! I want to go back to Lord Simeon! I want to run away from here right now!

Alas, there was nowhere to run to. All around us was nothing but water.

I was so scared that I wanted to cry, but I did my utmost to suppress this. There was nothing I could do, but I still wasn’t going to give up—not until the very last. I knew that Lord Simeon would come for me.

“This tiny boat surely can’t sail all the way to Orta, can it? The navy has sent out patrol boats, too. You’ll never get past them. How are you planning to escape?”

“Thank you for your concern. It’s true, even with a hostage it would be a pain to deal with pursuers. Fortunately, our allies’ ship should be close by now. I’ll just have to pray that we’re not caught before we can rendezvous.”

He looked away from me, off into the distance. We were probably still close to the island. The other two men showed no hint of worry, so in all likelihood they hadn’t come across any patrol boats. Though I still couldn’t be exactly sure of the situation, what I could surmise did not put me at ease.

I decided to try feigning seasickness. Recalling Lionel’s arrival at the village port, when he had staggered queasily off of the yacht, I tried to present a similar demeanor. “Being down here is making me feel rather unwell. I don’t suppose you could let me stand on deck and feel the breeze for a minute?”

Apparently confident that we were far enough from the village now, Mr. Mereaux permitted this straight away. “I don’t see why not. Here, take my hand—and watch your step.”

I wished I could have flung off the hand he offered rather than touch it, but it would have been too hard to climb up on my own. Once I had ascended to the deck, Alice, who was still cowering in the compartment below, stared up at me intently. I wondered what she was thinking. It was impossible to even imagine how I’d feel if I’d been sentenced to death in this way. Still, I couldn’t spend much time worrying about her. I was doing everything I could right now.

The boat was sailing parallel to the island some distance from the coast. We had almost reached the easternmost tip of the island, as marked by a cliff that closely resembled the one Raoul had fallen from.

If we go past that point, there’ll be nothing ahead of us but the open sea. From there, it won’t be long until we reach Ortan waters.

When I looked around I couldn’t spot any vessels in pursuit, only a handful of small yachts far in the distance. I trusted in Lord Simeon, but with no sign of him, I felt deeply unsure as to how he was planning to rescue me. My uncertainty swelled bit by bit as hopelessness threatened to overcome me. As hard as I tried to drive it away, I could find no way to do so. The world grew dark before my eyes as the despair set in.

The boat sailed while I tried to observe my surroundings. We reached the tip of the island and there was still no sign of rescue. All optimism that remained in me was on the verge of burning to ashes. Tears I couldn’t hold back welled up and threatened to spill forth.

Just then, something appeared from the other side of the cliff.

I blinked in surprise. A shadow was coming toward us, circling around the island from the opposite direction. Even without my glasses, I could soon see that it was a ship. It was bigger than a fishing boat, to be sure, though still smaller than a passenger ship, and with a distinctive narrow frame. *Yes! I know that ship!*

The operatives noticed it too. “Are they after us?” said one. They adjusted the sails and tried to change course, but the ship coming at us was far quicker. I’d

heard it described as the latest model of high-speed cruiser. Yes, speeding closer was Sasha's pride and joy, the *Phantom*!

Mr. Mereaux clicked his tongue.

A figure stood at the bow of the ship. He was still far enough away that he was no more than a blur, but I knew straight away. No matter how distant he was, I could recognize that man without a shadow of a doubt.

Lord Simeon!

My rising happiness was short-lived, torn to shreds as a gunshot rang out. Mr. Mereaux had aimed and fired a musket.

Oh no! Lord Simeon!

I froze in shock, but a moment later, he was still standing tall.

Phew. I suppose it must be hard to hit a faraway target while being tossed about by the sea.

A second and third shot followed, but none of them hit Lord Simeon. "Dammit," Mr. Mereaux muttered under his breath.

Amid smoke and fury, the distance between the two ships closed rapidly. Now even with my poor vision I could clearly make out Lord Simeon's windswept blond hair. He stared straight ahead—directly toward us.

More gunshots sounded from elsewhere. Gasping, I turned and saw another ship approaching from the open water. For a moment I was relieved, thinking it might be a navy patrol boat helping to execute a pincer attack, but I soon heard the joyful cry of one of the operatives. "They're here! We're going to make it!"

This was not a Lagrangian naval boat, but an Ortan ship. The shots fired from on board were not aimed toward us, but Lord Simeon.

Return fire came from the *Phantom*. Sasha, Roche, and others of their crew were taking aim at the other Ortan ship, which did its best to divert their attention and prevent them from getting too close to us. I had no idea what might happen.

Mr. Mereaux discarded his gun, turned to face me, and reached out with his hands. *Is he going to use me as a shield again? Never!* I tried to run, desperate

to escape his grasp, but he quickly caught up and grabbed my hair from behind. He pulled hard and I yelped in pain—but immediately after that, he let out a piercing scream.

His hands fell away and I was free once more. When I turned around, blood was gushing out of his shoulder. He had been shot. Reflexively, I looked across at Lord Simeon. He stood at the bow of the *Phantom*, unwavering, with a gun in his right hand.



He fired again and the other two operatives screamed and fell over. Lord Simeon had patiently waited until he was within range and precisely hit his marks despite the lack of stability.

Now that our boat had no one steering it, it was being buffeted around aimlessly by the wind and the waves. The *Phantom* swept close to us too quickly for the Ortan ship to intervene.

Mr. Mereaux was the only one of the trio who had not collapsed onto the deck. With ragged groans, he pressed a hand to the wound in his shoulder and stared daggers at Lord Simeon. Then he tried to come for me again. His other hand, wet with the blood he hated so much, reached toward me.

A blow came from the side and sent him crashing backwards.

He yelped and stumbled, colliding with the edge of the boat and falling backwards into the sea. A loud splash was heard before the waves swallowed all sound including his cries. Mr. Mereaux was gone—and he did not resurface.

Hearing a barely audible whimper, I turned to see Alice as she sank to the deck, shaking. She must have untied her feet by herself. No one had been paying any attention to her, so they hadn't even noticed when she escaped from below.

Mr. Mereaux had seen her as no more than a tool to be used for as long as she was useful and then thrown away when she became too inconvenient. He hadn't given her the dignity of thinking of her as a person, and that had led to his downfall.

Suddenly, she erupted into wild sobbing. A variety of emotions had no doubt overcome her—the relief at being safe now, the horror of committing an act like that, perhaps even the excitement of delivering her revenge. Whatever the reason, she simply sat there and cried. I kneeled beside her and embraced her trembling body.

The crew of the larger Ortan ship must have realized that we were now beyond their reach, as they reversed course and began sailing away. Sasha and Roche appeared eager to give chase, but Lord Simeon held them back, telling them it would be too dangerous for the *Phantom*. By now the naval boats had

started arriving, but the Ortan ship was fast. Following it would have been impossible.

When I was finally brought over to the *Phantom*, Lord Simeon's face was pale, as though he was suffering greatly. He peered down at me. "Are you hurt?"

He was so close to me that I could see every detail even without my glasses. That made me so happy that I immediately nestled my cheek against his broad chest. "I'm absolutely fine. It was a tad scary, but I had full faith in you. I knew you would come and you did. Thank you, Lord Simeon. You are the most reliable and steadfast person in the entire world. What would I do without you?"

"I'm just so glad you're safe."

He held me tightly. Although he typically restrained himself in public, this time he drew his cheek right up to me and stroked my head repeatedly, as if everyone around us had disappeared. Feeling his warmth and his breath again left me too joyful for words. I had longed to be back in these arms—to be held like this. There was no longer any need for me to hold back the tears that welled up. The terrible danger had passed. Relief washed over my whole body.

"I wondered how you would manage to catch up to us," I said once my tears had subsided. "Did you sail the other way around the island?"

Able to breathe more easily at last, Lord Simeon took on a lightly jesting tone. "There's no challenge that Captain Phantom and his crew cannot rise to. They set sail in no time flat."

Behind him, Sasha stood triumphant. I was sure his famous ancestor would have been proud. I offered thanks to the valiant pirate crew from the bottom of my heart.

Lord Simeon continued, "This meant we were able to chase them down without being spotted until the very last moment, but in the end we still had no choice but to expose ourselves. I was worried about him using you as a shield again, but all things considered, the outcome was quite favorable."

"Your shooting was simply marvelous. I had no idea you knew how to handle a gun."

“Well, as a military officer, it’s a matter of course. I must say, though, I don’t exactly like them.”

He put the handgun away and took a pair of glasses out of his pocket.

My glasses! He thought to pick them up even amongst all this chaos. Thank goodness they’re not broken.

I took them and put them back where they belonged. Being able to see properly was another source of relief. “You don’t like guns?”

“No, I can’t say I do. This might not be appropriate for a military officer to say, but guns are too powerful. They’re a weapon that doesn’t allow for any degree of finesse. Perhaps swords are an anachronism in this day and age, but personally I find them far superior.”

I laughed and nodded. “At the end of the day, you are the Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights. Even if ‘knight’ is no more than a traditional title at this point, anyone referred to as a knight simply *has* to carry a sword. And a riding crop, of course.”

“Ah yes, a riding crop. That most archetypal of knightly implements.”

He laughed as well following his retort. Our exchange felt as natural as always. This easygoing banter filled me with glee.

Alice and the wounded operatives were brought to the *Phantom* as well. As I watched, I reflected on just how characteristic of Lord Simeon it was to say he didn’t like something and yet execute it with flawless technique. He had carefully managed to avoid hitting any vital organs. Mr. Mereaux, too, had been shot non-lethally. Still, there was no sign of him in the water.

Glancing down, I said, “Perhaps he couldn’t swim after being hit in the shoulder.”

Had he drowned and sunk to the bottom of the sea, never to be seen again, just as he had planned for Alice? Given what an unpleasant person he was, I felt no great inclination to hope for his wellbeing—and if he had survived and was arrested, he would probably have been unable to avoid the death penalty in any case. However, the thought that I might have watched him drown before my very eyes was horrifying.

Lord Simeon narrowed his eyes as he looked down at the surface of the water. “That may be the ideal case, honestly speaking. In reality, I question whether he could really have sunk so suddenly. The other Ortan ship disappeared awfully quickly, too.” He cast his eyes off into the distance as if searching for it.

“What are you suggesting?”

“Their ship might have been able to retrieve him.” Almost to himself, he added, “It wasn’t such a great distance. If he could still swim, he might have managed it.”

Is that really possible? Could Mr. Mereaux have survived and made his escape? I was left with severely mixed feelings, unsure whether I should be wishing for that, or if it would be better for everyone if he *had* died.

I looked over at Alice. Someone had wrapped her in a blanket and she was sitting with an absent expression on her face. All the fury she had shown me had vanished; she merely sat there, like a pocket watch that had run down and needed winding. When we returned to dry land, she would undoubtedly be handed over to the military and subjected to a tough interrogation. Her resulting punishment was sure to be harsh as well. This was inevitable—it was the outcome she had courted with her own actions. When I thought of the fear and horror that Raoul experienced, it only seemed appropriate that she face the consequences. She wouldn’t be able to run anymore.

Even so, I hope she has a chance to start again. Hopefully she’ll come to truly understand the weight of her crimes and atone for them properly.

“Marielle,” said Lord Simeon, getting my attention. I turned and saw that his now-calm eyes were looking toward the island. He pointed. “Look, it’s the very thing you were so hoping to see.”

The sky above the island was clear of rain clouds now, replaced by vivid rays of sunshine. There, reaching like a bridge from one turquoise mountain to another, was a faint arc of seven colors.

I could almost sense the spirits dwelling on the island wandering across it. It was a beautiful, mystical spectacle that fully justified the island’s reputation as a paradise.

They say that blessings of joy are buried at the foot of the rainbow. Maybe the spirits that slumber here are trying to comfort us with a blissful dream.

Chapter Fifteen

Fortunately, neither Lionel nor the naval officers left behind in the village had suffered any serious injuries. By the time we were reunited with Lionel, he had already been given medical attention and had a bandage wrapped around his neck. Given where he had been stabbed, all present had been scared to death, but the wound itself was not life-threatening. The only reason he had fallen over was because he had been knocked down at the same time.

After hearing the full details of what had transpired with Mr. Mereaux and Alice, he nodded and simply said, "I see."

Even now that he knew the truth, his expression remained grim. Ultimately, even the apparent death of Mr. Mereaux did nothing to bring Raoul back. I keenly felt, as he did too, I'm sure, that pain and sadness don't simply disappear like that.

"I'm sorry for doubting you," he added after a few moments. "I'm sorry for all sorts of things. Grateful, too. And glad that you're safe."

His suspicion toward us finally dispelled, he was able to give a straightforward apology, as though his initial attitude had been a mirage. Nonetheless, he refused Lord Donatien's invitation to stay at the manor.

As I watched his carriage drive into the distance, Lord Simeon said, "I suspect he'd rather be alone for now. We should give him the time he needs."

At his prompting, we began to make our way back to our room. With some measure of hope in my voice, I asked, "We will have a chance to see him one day, won't we?"

"More often than you would ever want to, I'm sure. We have a large family reunion every year. Lionel is the heir to his branch of the family, so he won't be able to ignore those forever. I imagine his father will start dragging him along."

I had no idea they had a custom like that. The reunions will probably be held at the main branch's manor, which will make it the wife's responsibility—mine,

in other words—to make all the preparations and entertain the guests on the day. I'll have to take lessons from my mother-in-law and work as hard as I can.

“When is it usually held?”

“Around the start of autumn, before those who live in the countryside return to their homes. This year, however, we were able to see everyone at our wedding reception, so I suppose we might hold off until next year now. Perhaps by then, Lionel will have recovered his spirits to some degree.”

They say that time heals all wounds. Maybe the changing of the seasons will do Lionel some good. Next time I meet him, I want to start from the beginning and finally get to know the real him. I'm sure we'll see the sort of genuine smile that he's been unable to muster on this trip.

I expressed this thought as we reached the door to the room. Lord Simeon opened the door and let me enter first. With some bafflement in his voice, he said, “You’ve had an oddly favorable view of him all along considering how badly he treated you.”

“What do you mean? I’d say he largely ignored me, if anything. You were the target of all his scorn.”

“Joanna told me what happened. He barged into you and pushed you over at Sans-Terre port, didn’t he?”

Oh, she told him. Well, I suppose I never asked her not to.

“He used some rather abusive language toward you, I gather,” he said.

“Nothing you wouldn’t expect from someone in an irate mood. This sort of thing happens often in crowds. I doubt he really intended to knock me down. I simply wasn’t looking where I was going, and he used a little too much force.”

“Even so, I’d hope for an apology in that situation, not an insult.”

Just as I had anticipated, Lord Simeon was rather angry about this. Seeing the grimace on his face, a thought suddenly occurred to me. “Did Joanna tell you about this right at the start of the voyage, by any chance?”

When I had started formulating plans to help him and Lionel start getting along better, not only had Lord Simeon shown no enthusiasm for this idea, he

had seemed quite opposed to it. Perhaps quiet anger at his treatment of me had been hidden behind that response.

Rather than replying, Lord Simeon looked away. The displeasure and awkward embarrassment on his face made me burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, nothing,” I said, continuing to chuckle. “This does remind me of something I meant to ask you, though. What do you think of Lionel yourself?”

Even the hardheaded Demon Vice Captain, feared by enemy and ally alike, must have some situations where he’s driven purely by antipathy. I don’t see it as a fault at all. It makes him human—not to mention adorable.

“What do I think of him? In what sense, exactly?”

“We’ve established that Lionel was never fond of you, but I’m wondering how you felt about him—while growing up, for example. How did you see him back then?”

He sat down in a chair, pulling me along with him. Rather than sitting me down beside him, he put me in his lap. As I leaned against his strong shoulders, I sought an answer with my eyes.

Haltingly, he replied, “Indeed, I see what you mean. To be quite honest with you, I’ve never cared much about him one way or the other. He’s far from the only relative I had growing up, and we never had any particular quarrels.”

His arms, wrapped around my waist, pulled me in even closer to him. *This has almost become an involuntary reflex for him. Once upon a time he’d have started blushing. I suppose the more you do something, the more natural it becomes? Or perhaps he’s giving me a peek at the inner nature that was there all along, pushed deep down and masked by his serious exterior.*

Despite how he had always seemed, there were definitely aspects of Lord Simeon that made it abundantly clear he was related to his grandfather and his parents. Rigid as he was in so many ways, he could be surprisingly flexible and accepting as well—and very sweet and charming. Still, at night he was rather assertive. I was continuing to learn about more and more sides of him.

“I admit this might come across as somewhat heartless, but I was largely indifferent to him. At the most, I watched from afar, with the unspoken wish that he would silence all his critics by putting in the effort to overcome their barbed comments. The best revenge would have been to find success and rub their noses in it.”

“He probably would have been quite annoyed if you’d told him that.”

Sometimes there are certain people in life to whom it’s impossible to catch up no matter how much effort you put in. Whatever Lionel had achieved, Lord Simeon would always have been ahead of him, so those words would have rung hollow coming from Lord Simeon himself.

Sullenly, he replied, “I didn’t say it. I merely thought it.” Then he looked at me with kind eyes and said, “If you were in Lionel’s position, I know you’d have handled it differently. You don’t spend all your time comparing yourself to other people—wishing you were in their place and feeling inferior. Even insults make no impact on you. You enjoy them, even. You remain optimistic regardless of the situation and always try to make your life as exciting as possible. In my younger days this wasn’t a matter I considered so deeply, but looking at you, I have a much clearer picture of what’s truly important. Other people’s judgments matter far less than being satisfied with oneself. Lionel couldn’t hope to measure up to you, and neither could I, quite frankly.”

All this praise made my face redden slightly. “You don’t think I simply run wild with no regard for safety?”

“There are certainly times I feel that way as well,” he said, agreeing in a serious tone. Then we both giggled.

I can never hope to measure up to Lord Simeon either. I love the way we live our lives together. Perhaps we do occasionally grow exasperated with each other, but we have a lot of respect for one another, and generally get along so well. I want every day to feel like this.

“Have your feelings changed at all? Do you still feel indifferent toward Lionel?”

“No, actually. To tell the truth, this incident has given me a new perspective on him. It surprised me that he went to such great lengths to hunt down the

truth. I'd never expected him to show such determination on behalf of anything or anyone, even his deceased brother. Perhaps this is his true self and I simply never had a chance to see it before. I had no idea he had such strength in him—that he's capable of more than simply sitting and feeling sorry for himself. If need be, he really can put in the work. It seemed he even realized that himself and expressed some remorse for his own arrogance in the end."

In relating his thoughts about Lionel, Lord Simeon had unwittingly revealed that he had, in all likelihood, looked down on Lionel to some extent, despite his claims of indifference. *That's an easy trap for anyone to fall into. I'll have to be extra careful to ensure I don't do so myself.*

Envisioning a brighter future between them, I said, "In that case, the two of you should be able to make up when you have a chance to meet again."

I could tell from Lord Simeon's dubious expression that he didn't quite agree.

"Do you not think so?"

"Well, perhaps. To a certain extent." He phrased his reply in a reluctant and noncommittal way and knitted his brows. It seemed as though he still bore some sort of ill will toward Lionel. Then he quickly shook his head. "It's not that I have any particular dislike of him. Only, if he and I become closer, then he'll inevitably spend more time in your company as well."

"Excuse me?"

After all my confusion about what was bothering him so much, this clarification left me astonished. *Here he is being the doting fiancé again. Well, the doting husband now, since we're married. He doesn't realize how biased he is. He thinks everyone's just as drawn to me as he is!*

I told him, "In my estimation, Lionel is a man who puts a great deal of stock in physical attractiveness."

"People can be surprising on occasion. I know him to be a curmudgeon, but he not only gave a frank apology, but even said thank you. I guarantee that the rest of our family would be just as shocked. It gives me a very bad feeling of what might be to come. I'd like to prevent him from getting too close to you."

Honestly, what is wrong with him? I could do nothing but laugh with a feeling

of exhaustion. “He was talking to you when he apologized and said thank you. That had nothing to do with me.”

“I think he was talking to you, actually.”

“Well, who knows. Either way, I suspect you’re overthinking the matter. I’m a thoroughly average person and simply not attractive enough for him. If anything, Mr. Mereaux was the one who expressed more of an interest in me.”

“What was that!?” His pretty eyebrows twitched and he suddenly exuded an aura of murderous intent.

I rapidly added, “Not romantic interest, I’m sure! That would have been an unlikely twist indeed. Rather, he had a certain kind of curiosity toward me. I think he found me intriguing.”

He fell silent for a moment. A disquieting blaze rose up in the eyes behind his glasses. I grew slightly anxious, wondering if it would have been better not to tell him, given his tendency to burn with quiet anger.

I wanted him to hear about this, though. It’s not as though I enjoyed it. It actually made me highly uncomfortable.

“I should have aimed for his head, not his shoulder,” he said in a guttural murmur. I had the sense that these were his true, unvarnished feelings, and that was just a bit terrifying.

“I’m...glad I didn’t have to witness that, to be honest. Besides, he’s gone now.”

Whether he was dead or alive, Mr. Mereaux was out of the picture. The navy had spent a long time searching for him, but in the end no body was found. If he really had gotten away, that was vexing, of course. It was also quite worrying, because it meant he’d certainly be plotting to infiltrate Lagrange again. Just because one mission had failed did not mean Orta would give up.

When I mentioned this, Lord Simeon replied in a gentle tone, “That’s true, but it’s no use worrying about every possible eventuality. Countries are always sending covert operatives to infiltrate one another’s territories. It’s practically a fact of life. We have countermeasures in place, so there’s no need for you to be concerned.” No doubt he had noticed my unease and was trying to reassure

me.

“Does that mean Lagrange is sending operatives to sneak into other countries and do harm?”

“I don’t know, since that would be outside of my jurisdiction. An entirely different branch is in charge of such things.”

Lies, I was certain. He was a confidant of His Highness the Crown Prince, who stood at the center of the kingdom’s decision-making. There was no way he wouldn’t know.

Still, it’s too late to be complaining about my husband for being who he is. Feigning ignorance about official secrets is a matter of course for him. Oh well—at least if both sides are doing it, they’ll both be able to take action to oppose it. In the end, international relations is a game of sounding one another out, deceiving one another, and occasionally helping one another.

Only a small number of people knew about this incident. On the whole, the islanders and tourists had continued with their peaceful lives and had no idea that anything had happened. Since it was an international matter, the investigation would probably be kept classified as well and handled with great discretion. Most likely, the truth about Raoul’s death would not be widely publicized.

Maybe that’s for the best. It would only attract more attention and spark unkind gossip that would put his family through more pain. Now that the criminals have been arrested, even his parents in Sans-Terre probably have no desire for it to be publicly announced.

As life returned to normal on Enciel Island, one more little detail was finally revealed.

“What? Gramps? *You’re* the lord of the island!? You’re pulling my leg!”

Sasha dropped the cake in his hand the second he saw Lord Donatien enter the drawing room. Not even noticing that his beloved treat had gone to waste, he stared in blank amazement. Lara and Roche, sitting alongside him, reacted similarly.

The three of them had been called to the lord's manor to be thanked for their assistance with the case. Upon learning the truth that had been concealed for four years, they were extremely surprised, to say the least.

"Sorry for keeping it from you, lad. I just wanted to avoid causing extra conflict in your life. The people of Thio are very kind, but they still find themselves at loggerheads sometimes. If you suddenly had a nobleman as your guardian, the others would have felt like you were getting special treatment. They might have distanced themselves from you."

Though it was the first time they had seen "Gramps" wearing such fine clothes, he spoke in the same manner he always had in the village. Even when he sat down right in front of them, they were still dumbfounded.

A servant who had been standing at the ready stepped in and served tea without a moment's delay, additionally clearing up the fallen cake. The understated tact with which Sasha's now-empty plate was replenished was simply exemplary—although the servant did have a faint look of both pity and amusement when glancing at the trio.

"I never intended to keep it a secret forever," said Lord Donatien. "I decided right from the start that I'd tell you the truth when you came of age."

"You could have told me sooner! I'm already an adult. I have been for ages."

Lord Donatien looked away. "Yes, well, 'adult' can be a tough word to define."

Both Lara and Roche turned a gaze on Sasha that silently acknowledged what all present were thinking.

"The reason I summoned you here was, after all, to discuss some important matters with you. Yes, indeed, you're an adult now. Don't worry, that is why I decided to tell you."

Despite his words, he took on a tone as if pacifying a child. Watching from further along the table, it was a struggle to suppress my laughter. Lord Simeon, too, though maintaining a perfectly solemn facade, was occasionally forced to cover up his mouth.

"Go on, then. What do you need to discuss?"

“The first matter is your remaining inheritance. Aside from the land you already sold, there’s additional acreage that I’ve been managing for you. When you turn eighteen you’ll be able to take charge of them officially, but if you prefer you could do so straight away. However, they’re not on Enciel, but on the mainland.”

Sasha appeared surprised to learn that there was more to his inheritance. “I don’t remember my parents saying anything about this.”

“Well, you were only young. It’s also not as lucrative as you might expect. The size of the plots is too small to yield much, and yet there are still taxes due on the land. In all honesty, this land was more of a burden to your father than anything. Since it’s land you inherited from your forebears, it would have been wrong of me to sell it, but you could choose to do exactly that if you’re otherwise not that bothered. What do you want to do?”

This was too sudden a question for Sasha to answer meaningfully. He groaned in confusion. “Can I have some time to think about it? I don’t think I really need any land, but it has been handed down to me from dad, and my ancestors before him, so I don’t know if it’s all right to just get rid of it either.”

“Hmm, yes.”

“And if I do take it over, I’ll have to pay taxes on it, you said? Wait, is no one paying taxes on it now?”

There was no chance that was the case. Unable to bear it any longer, Lord Simeon smiled wryly and said, “House Flaubert has been renting out the property and using the resulting funds to pay the taxes. If you take over management, then naturally, the taxes will fall to you.”

“But I’d never be able to pay them in a million years!” He blanched and shook his head.

Lord Donatien laughed loudly. “Hold on. No need to rush to a decision. We can still put it off for another two years, after all. By then, you should know how to manage things in a way that nets you the money you need for the taxes. It’s just a matter of learning the skills you need. On that note, there is one other question I have for you. How would you feel about going to the capital and attending school? There’s nothing wrong with living on the island and

continuing your work as a fisherman and as part of the local guard, but I also think it would serve you well to get an education befitting of Baron d'Indy's heir. It would open a lot of doors for you."

Sasha stared blankly again. Lara, meanwhile, was more than just confused. She showed signs of being quite wary. "Can't he go to school on the island?"

"I'm talking about a different kind of school—one where he can study more complex subjects. He could aim to be a doctor or a lawyer, for example. Of course, it would require him to put in a lot of effort. It's a school for students who come from wealthy backgrounds or are particularly bright and talented."

Sasha sighed. "I'd rather not. I've never wanted to be anything fancy like that."

"Those are just two examples. Knowledge is essential if you want to be a businessman, too. Gaining an education definitely wouldn't be a waste of time."

But even this further entreaty had no effect. Sasha shook his head. Of all the expressions I'd seen on his face so far, this was the most mature. "I understand what you're getting at, Gramps. I admit I'm an uneducated country boy, but I don't think there's any problem with that. I like going out to sea every day and keeping this island safe. There's something much better than being a student or a businessman, and that's being a pirate." With a cheerful grin, he added, "I would like to visit the city again, since all I got to see the other day was the port, but I'd be happy just going for a sightseeing trip."

Lara looked so overjoyed that she was moved to tears. Roche whispered a teasing remark and kicked her under the table.

Lord Donatien accepted Sasha's decision with a smile. The boy he had been watching over had indeed grown into a man.

I assured Sasha that if and when he came to the capital, he'd of course be welcome to stay with us. With a promise to Lara that she was welcome and should definitely come as well, I said goodbye and saw them off.

While Lord Donatien, equal parts happy and sad, reminisced to his butler about how it seemed like only yesterday that Sasha was a tiny child, Lord Simeon and I left him and went out into the back garden. In contrast to the

garden at the front of the house, which was spectacularly florid, here the atmosphere was more subdued. At the feet of the trees were small mixed flower beds modeled after natural hills and dales. I was sure my brother would have been thrilled to see them.

In a far corner, a number of arches were arranged to form a tunnel. Climbing plants had grown thickly around the arches, giving a pleasant sense of being shaded by the foliage. Inside, the path was made of wooden planks rather than paving stones.

I walked in, followed by Lord Simeon, then stopped and turned around halfway along. “I must say, I’m still left with quite a few unknowns.”

He asked what I meant.

“How long had you been waiting in that cave, for instance? Given the timeline, I don’t see how you could have arrived before us and been lying in ambush.”

Although Sasha *had* been stalling for time, it still seemed impossible that Lord Simeon could have received my message and then gone to the hideout quickly enough. I put a hand up to my chin as I puzzled over it.

Lord Simeon was ready with an explanation. “As I mentioned, I foresaw a number of different possibilities. As soon as I realized Mereaux wasn’t being drawn into our trap, I put a new plan into action. Having set off in a boat, there were two main courses of action he might have been taking—either he was fleeing the island or he was heading for Thio. I ultimately decided that Thio was the more likely choice and followed him there. Then I saw a signal from the village, which made me hurry.”

“A signal? What kind of signal?”

“You asked Charles’s sister to send word to me as quickly as possible, isn’t that right? I’d requested previously that in a situation along those lines, they should send a smoke signal. The moment Charles heard about it, he leapt into action.”

It took a moment for me to remember who Charles was. *Oh yes, of course! That’s Roche’s real name.*

“A smoke signal. That’s a rather interesting choice.”

“Antiquated, perhaps, but effective.”

He smiled with a hint of pride.

Now that I think about it, I did see some odd-looking smoke not long after leaving the village. At the time I thought it was a bonfire, but it turns out to have been a smoke signal. When did he give that order, exactly? He really thought of everything.

“That still doesn’t explain how you overtook us.”

“It’s less that I overtook you and more that I reached your position via a different route. There are other paths in the surrounding terrain that lead into the cave. Sasha boasted about it, claiming that even in the unlikely chance the cave came under attack, they would still be able to escape—although there are no records of Captain d’Indy ever having done such a thing.”

That makes sense. I suppose it wouldn’t be much of a pirate hideout if it didn’t have a few secrets like that.

“I see. Fair enough, then.” I paused. “Wait, hold on a moment. How did you come to know that Mr. Mereaux was the Ortan operative in the first place? From what you’ve just said, it sounds as though you’ve had your sights on him all along. Did you notice his onyx jewelry as well?”

“What onyx jewelry?” he replied, appearing rather baffled.

Apparently he hadn’t picked up on this at all, so I gave a brief explanation.

“Jewelry as a uniquely Ortan quirk. I believe it would take a feminine eye to spot that.” He had quite some admiration in his voice. “For me, the decisive factor was the card. Just as you pointed out, what appeared to be a small mistake was actually an Ortan punctuation mark he had started to write.”

“And that alone was enough?”

I found that far more impressive than my own deductions. Seeing my surprise, Lord Simeon said matter-of-factly, “Not exactly, no. I came to my conclusion based on all of the available facts. I’d heard of an operative known as the ‘Silver Fox,’ so I wondered straight away if that might have been Mereaux. ‘Mereaux’

must have been a false identity, of course. Next was the fact that he did everything a little *too* perfectly. His pronunciation was flawless, and his handwriting was so perfectly constructed that it almost looked like printed type. That must have been the way he disguised his own writing—by removing any and all distinguishing features from each letter. In a way, it's rather like your behavior when suppressing your presence, wouldn't you say?"

I pursed my lips at his playful remark, but I couldn't disagree.

He continued, "Initially I thought he might have simply been a highly meticulous and fussy individual. However, it felt rather odd, in that case, that he would leave a blot on his message card. I'm often described as fussy myself, and for a short message like that, it would hardly take any time to rewrite it at all, so naturally I would do so. However, he sent the card with the mistake intact. At the time I didn't know if it meant anything, but it gnawed at me nonetheless. I realized it was an Ortan punctuation mark while looking at his other correspondence."

This was an attention to detail that few but Lord Simeon could have achieved. Based on one tiny clue that would normally have been overlooked, he had deduced a carefully hidden secret. *No wonder a certain spy I'm acquainted with dislikes him so much. I'm sure Mr. Mereaux would have been far more careful if he'd known about Lord Simeon's nature.*

Even for a very skilled operative, ten years is a long time to infiltrate a foreign country. Now, at last, he had become an object of suspicion. He had left a weak point exposed—yes, it was a weak point, just as it had seemed to me. Unfortunately for him, it was spotted by none other than Lord Simeon, and that spelled the end for him.

Mr. Mereaux had disappeared amongst the waves and we still didn't know his fate. He had remained ominous and uncanny until the very end. I had found myself occasionally thinking about him, like a thorn I couldn't quite pull out.

"I told you, you can happily forget about him," said Lord Simeon when I mentioned this, trying to persuade me out of my worries. "Even if he is still alive, he'll never enter your life again. Besides, when we're back in Sans-Terre and your new life begins, you won't have time to think about Orta. Mother is

anxious to parade you about in society, so be prepared for that. Once you've settled in, I imagine you'll want to bring your cat over from your family home. Oh, and you'll have to write your next book, of course. You seem to have collected plenty of reference material for a tale about pirates."

All of this was fairly reasonable, but I couldn't quite agree with the last part. "Actually, I don't have enough yet. I seem to recall you promising that when we arrived on the island, you'd show me a particular highlight—a 'very special place indeed,' as I recall. So far, I've hardly seen any of the island. I want to experience the excitement of all the places the pirates would have frequented."

He raised his eyebrows, slightly astonished. He let out a chuckle and bent his head down to look directly at my face. "The situation is finally calm enough for us to relax, and already you're looking for adventure. An ordinary young lady would sleep for days after such an ordeal."

I reached out and took the glasses off his pretty face. "Remember, I'm not a 'young lady' anymore. I'm a married woman, now. A wife."

"Somehow that term just doesn't seem right. Can't you find another?" He took off my glasses as well.

"'New bride,' perhaps?"

"No, that doesn't quite fit either. Not that either of them are incorrect, of course."

I stretched upward and entwined my arms around his shoulders. His strong arms held me tight and pulled me in even closer to him.

"This is a chance for you to flex your literary muscles. Can't you come up with a term that has a touch more charm?"

At this distance, I could feel his breath on me—and within moments, his teasing lips came for mine. He didn't even leave me enough time to reply. Hidden away inside the verdant tunnel, we enjoyed a sweet moment together. No matter how many times we did this, my heart never failed to start racing.

I'm sure that after ten years, or twenty years, or even when we're old and gray, my heart will still race for you every single day. Not one day will go by that I don't love you.

That feeling, that knowledge, left me overjoyed. I would be able to keep him by my side and touch him whenever I wanted. We would continue to exchange our love and affection with one another. Having all those days ahead of me was such a happy thought that I could hardly bear it.

Once I was no longer standing on tiptoes to reach him, Lord Simeon said mischievously, “Well then, I’ll gladly fulfill your wish with a hands-on experience of pirate life. Does that sound appealing?” His boyish expression, which I’d seen several times on this trip now, suggested he was greatly looking forward to this. “You’ve never gone camping before, have you? Putting up a tent and sleeping on the ground with nothing but a thin mattress to rest on. Could you manage it?”

“Camping? No, I’ve never done that.”

“In the military, it’s what we’d refer to as a field training exercise. We’d have to boil water and cook over a fire. We won’t take any servants with us—we’ll do everything ourselves. I’d ask your assistance in pitching the tent as well. Oh, I mentioned cooking, but it would actually be no more than roasting or heating up whatever food we can carry with us. Certainly nothing like the meals you’re used to. There wouldn’t be a bath, either. Well? Would it be too tough for my wife, the pure noblewoman?”

I could see the smile in his light blue eyes. Even as he asked, he knew exactly how I was going to answer.

“It sounds perfect!”

Laughing, I embraced him again. *What a wonderful husband I have. He knew exactly what I wanted!*

“Can we go today? Right now?”

“That’s a bit too sudden. Let’s set off tomorrow morning. We’ll be walking through the woods, so you should dress in comfortable clothes, just as you did the other day.”

“I simply can’t wait!”

“It’s almost the time of year for the fireflies to start flitting about. At night, by the water’s edge, you’ll be able to enjoy a truly magical sight. Then, when

morning arrives, the landscape will be even more beautiful to gaze upon. The place I have in mind will let you fully appreciate both the mountains and the sea at the same time.”

I’m so excited already, and all he’s doing is raising my expectations even further! Oh no, how will I ever sleep tonight?

Hand in hand, we exited the verdant tunnel. The bright southern sun shone down on us once more.

This was a new page in the life we were embarking on together. All sorts of new experiences would be waiting for us. Sadness and fear would occasionally appear at our doorstep, I was sure, but as long as we held each other’s hands like this, it would always turn out all right.

You will always be there to protect me. I want to nestle up close to you forever, too, and lend you my support.

The warmth that passed between us lit up the path ahead. As long as these hands did not part, we would never be shrouded in darkness. Wherever we went, it would always, always be bright.

Happiness is shining down upon the rainbow island—upon the world I walk through with you. Bathed in a brilliant glow, I love you today and always.



The Sentimentality of Albert Poisson

There are all sorts of traditions in this world that we hold onto even though they no longer seem to match the present era. The military branch that I lead, the Royal Order of Knights of the Kingdom of Lagrange, is one of these. In this day and age it should really have a simpler name like “the Royal Guard,” but the old-fashioned title of “knight” doesn’t seem to be going anywhere. The neighboring country of Easdale also has an organization styled as “knights,” too. Being a concept that appears in countless plays and novels, people have a great deal of sentimentality when it comes to those honored with such a title.

This despite the fact that the real knights of old were hardly limited to the sort of lofty, virtuous folk depicted in stories. By comparison, today’s military officers are actually subjected to far stricter regulations. The royal guards, in particular, often come into contact with key figures from within the country and without, so their position garners them quite some attention, and the slightest scandal invariably leads to heavy censure. The rules for maintaining official secrets are rather strict as well, since the men are privy to a lot of information that could endanger the kingdom if it became known to anyone outside the military.

As such, the testing ground was usually guarded very fiercely indeed. On this particular day, it had a larger crowd than usual. A gunshot rang out, then a second, then a third. For a single weapon, it was a very short interval between shots.

The lined up targets had all been neatly hit right in the center. Simeon lowered the rifle and nodded. “It’s well constructed. There’s been a marked improvement in performance.”

The engineers, who had been holding their breath as they watched, exhaled in visible relief. The military bigwigs, too, began chattering, expressing their surprise and joy.

I went over to Simeon and took the new rifle from him. “Hmm. It doesn’t look

as though it's changed all that much. Could you really tell the difference when you used it?"

"Yes, absolutely. It's noticeably easier to use."

I took some new bullets and tried reloading it. Indeed, I could see how it was different from the earlier versions. The engineers began to explain that safety had been enhanced and that the risk of explosion was now much lower.

"We've also made several improvements to the rifling inside the barrel, which has increased the accuracy. Unlike muskets, which are only useful at very close quarters, this can find its mark from quite a distance away."

"Goodness me."

"The increase in range is quite substantial, and the force when the bullet hits the target is—"

This proud description prompted all the surrounding officers to gasp and exclaim in admiration. They began throwing questions at the engineers all at once.

I glanced at Simeon. Our trusty Vice Captain had such a perfectly composed expression it could have been made out of porcelain. Most people tended to be fooled by this look, but anyone close to him would know the truth. This was the face he made when he didn't want his inner thoughts to be discerned—and I knew what he was thinking without even having to ask.

You see, even though he had just demonstrated flawless skill with a gun, Simeon actually hated guns.

He grumbled that they were a weapon that didn't allow for any degree of finesse. They simply had too much destructive power. A sword was certainly a weapon that could be used to kill people, but a gun was far more brutal. It didn't require all that much physical skill; with a basic idea of how to handle it, you could easily take a life. Day by day, research was proceeding that made guns more practical and more efficient. The sabers that currently formed part of our standard equipment were all but certain to fade away at some point and be replaced entirely.

When that day comes, the title of "knight" really will become a mere

formality. It's probably not too far away. A new era is likely to dawn while I'm still at my post.

Saddened as I was by the thought of change, it occurred to me that I, too, was someone harboring sentimentality about the concept of knights.

"Stand back."

I finished reloading and took aim with the rifle. After lining up my shot, I slowly pulled the trigger. Once again, a loud *bang* cut through the air.

I grunted in confusion. The bullet I'd fired had torn a hole in the wall beside the target. Rather than hitting dead center as Simeon had, I had missed by rather a wide margin.

"It appears it can't hit its mark after all." I turned to face the engineers. "Has the accuracy *really* been improved, or did it only appear that way because it was in Simeon's hands?"

Simeon, after all, could compete for first or second place in terms of marksmanship ability amongst not only the Order, but all our military forces on land or sea. Even with muskets, which were notorious for their poor accuracy, he was always able to find his target. Perhaps, I considered, it had been a mistake to have Simeon perform the test.

In an instant, the engineers became flustered. "Oh, no, that shouldn't be the case."

The bigwigs began to grimace as well. Amongst the many babbling voices, Simeon sighed. "It's your own lack of skill, Captain. Of course you'd miss if you aim the way you did."

"I beg your pardon? But I underwent the full training program. I'd expect to do better than this."

"You never hit the target accurately even once in training. Don't try to feign ignorance."

"Well, if the accuracy has been enhanced, the results should be somewhat better than my training, shouldn't they? And yet they're exactly the same. I know how to settle this. Lisnard, you give it a try."

Simeon's aide, who had been watching from the sidelines with the easygoing look of someone happy to be uninvolved, suddenly found I had thrust the rifle into his hands.

"What!? Me!? But, I, well... Shooting isn't exactly my specialty either."

"That's quite all right," I insisted. "If it's only fired by a particularly skilled officer, we won't know if the improvements are down to the weapon itself or the wielder."

"But...!"

Simeon smiled maliciously. "I see your point, Captain. Go ahead and fire, Lieutenant."

Poor Alain had been put in an impossible predicament. If he hit the target successfully it would besmirch my reputation as Captain, while if he missed, he could expect to face grueling training from Simeon, the Vice Captain. A cold sweat appeared to run over him. He was a man to be pitied, and indeed, I could see the sympathy in the eyes of those around us.

Yes, I definitely feel that swords are more suitable for knights than guns are. I agree with Simeon—royal guards have no need for guns. It would be awful for it to become necessary to carry them in His Highness's presence, frankly. No, that's not just an excuse.

Afterwards, the chief of staff said, "See to it that absolutely no information gets out about this. Orta will try to steal it by any means necessary."

"Rather than hiding it, what if we spread rumors about a decoy and lure them in? If it all goes according to plan, we'll be able to expose some of their operatives. We could make them think the latest development is a handgun rather than a rifle, for example."

This suggestion rolled nonchalantly off Simeon's tongue. Even though he hated the changing times, this man who deserved to be called a knight more than anyone else continued to adapt to them.

Perhaps this is the nature of youth, and I'm old-fashioned in a different sense of the word—lamentable as that may be.

Afterword

Remember, reader, when I promised there wouldn't be guns? I lied.

I just thought it would be fun to drop a line like that. With that out of the way, hello! It's me, Haruka Momo. Yes, despite my bold statements in the afterword of volume one, I broke my own rules in spectacular fashion. Both guns and steam engines appeared in this book.

As I thought about the story ahead, I realized it was unavoidable and I had to introduce them no matter what. It is meant to be the late modern period, after all. It would be weirder for these countries *not* to have that kind of technology. They probably have cannons, too. I definitely don't want to have cars and trains driving around, though. Let's call that my own idiosyncrasy.

One more problem came about in continuing the story. Have you figured it out? Marielle is no longer Miss Clarac but Mrs. Flaubert. At the end of the last volume she got married to Simeon. She's not keeping her maiden name.

That being said, it's also too late to change what the series is called. It's really, really awkward, but in the end, this volume still has "Clarac" in the title.

Confession time: I just never thought the series would go on this long. When I wrote the original story, it was just based on an idea that popped into my head. I thought of it like a quick one-line gag, or a firework going off. Even when I was given the chance to turn it into a novel, I thought that the first volume would be the end of it. Then, before I knew it, we were up to book five already. The engaged couple became a married couple and started a new life together. You never know where life's going to take you—and that doesn't only apply to Marielle.

The details of the setting were all quite vague at the beginning, so I ended up creating the world as I went along. It was also as I was writing that I learned what kind of people Marielle, Simeon, and the others were. It might not be the ideal way to write novels, but it is fun in its own way. A story is a living entity that moves and grows in ways that even the author can't imagine. Maybe the

resulting series is something like a baby journal?

As always, Maro's wonderful illustrations added tons of sparkles and joy to the story. First you're blown away by the color illustrations, and then you get to the ones inside! The art is just incredible all around. It's like an extra large meal deal where you get to enjoy laughs and romance and suspense all in one book.

I'm also grateful to Alskapan for the manga version of the series, which crafts a whole new world and lets the series shine in a different form. This is another development I never expected at the start, and I'm overjoyed. Thanks to the support of a great number of people, my single firework set off a chain reaction and took on a life of its own. From the bottom of my heart, I'm grateful to all the people who have been involved.

Above all, I'm grateful to you, the readers. I hope you enjoyed this latest entry in the series. Thank you so much for sticking with me this long!

—Haruka Momo

April 2019

Bonus Short Stories

Marielle

The last remnants of winter were gone, leaving mere echoes of their departing footsteps. As we reached the middle of April, the bitter cold was a distant memory. Very soon, I would marry Lord Simeon—but before that came my nineteenth birthday.

“My lady, you’ve received a delivery from Lord Simeon. Just look at this bouquet of flowers! It’s ginormous!”

Natalie, my maid, entered my room. I stopped writing and turned to look. In her hands was a bouquet so large that it covered her face. Accompanying it was a much smaller box that could be held in one hand.

“What a shame that you can’t see each other on your birthday,” said Natalie.

“We can’t do much about it, sadly. We’re both so busy.”

Lord Simeon had buried himself in work at the palace so that he’d be able to take enough time off for our honeymoon. I, meanwhile, had to submit a manuscript before our wedding, so I was spending all day every day glued to my desk. On both our parts, the situation was so critical that even a special occasion like my birthday had to play second fiddle.

Natalie handed me the box and rested the bouquet on the desk. The gentle springtime scent tickled at my nose. It was a multicolored array of flowers, large and small, as though every single variety that was in bloom right now had been collected and lovingly tied together with a ribbon.

I carefully removed the attached message card. In the same meticulous handwriting I’d seen many times before, it read, “Apologies that I am unable to give you your gift in person. I hope it’s to your taste.”

Eager to find out what he had given me, I took the wrapping off the box, revealing the mark of a famous jewelry store. “Goodness. I wonder if it’s a

necklace? Let's see..."

Carefully, I opened the box. However, the cry I let out was *not* one of joy.

Hearing my distress, Natalie peered down and gasped. After the initial surprise, her reaction was much like mine. "My, it certainly is rather extravagant."

There, enshrined in white silk, was an ornate necklace with seven large diamonds surrounded by a number of smaller ones. It was accompanied by a pair of earrings in a matching design. The abundance of jewels sparked so brightly, it dazzled my eyes.

Natalie began, "Only, isn't it...?"

Isn't it a little too much? She cut herself off partway, unable to form the words, but I was certain that was what she meant as she smiled awkwardly.

I heaved a sigh. "It's beautiful, but I do wish he'd thought more carefully about the recipient. I don't mean to look a gift horse in the mouth, of course, but did he actually imagine how it would look if I wore it?"

Jewelry is much like clothing. Everyone has styles that suit them—and those that don't. Surely it goes without saying that a ridiculously fine necklace like this wouldn't suit me! I'd be rendered invisible, as though the necklace was the focus and I was merely a mannequin used to display it. I don't think I'd even make a particularly good mannequin!

As ever, Lord Simeon simply had no eye for this sort of thing. There was something charming about the way he exuded the aura of a ladykiller while in fact knowing nothing about the way to a woman's heart, but it could be remarkably irritating as well.

"It's all my fault. I should have told him what I wanted. Something plainer like pearls or coral would have been perfect. Though I suppose if I'd told him that, it would have been like I was demanding a gift. Ugh, my word!"

"Come now," said Natalie nervously. "It's for your birthday, after all, so he must have wanted to splash out for something more elaborate. His new year's present for you was more to your usual taste, as I recall."

“Yes, and something along those lines would have been perfect. If he was trying to go the extra mile, it was *quite* unnecessary.”

“It also matches your engagement ring exactly. It’s just the same sort of diamond. If you wear the ring, the necklace, and the earrings all together, it makes a set. That would be rather nice.”

“Oh, yes. I suppose.”

I slumped over listlessly, squashing my cheek against the desk. The sweet, refreshing scent of the flowers was even stronger now. Looking at the collection of gentle spring colors, a point occurred to me.

When he’d sent me flowers before, they had always been roses—red ones, no less—which had such a strong association with lovers that as a choice, they were almost par for the course. He had probably made the decision on his own for that very reason, or received such advice from someone else.

This time, however, he had sent a gentler assortment that looked almost as though he had gone out and picked wildflowers. There were roses included, but only in softer shades of white and pink. He had probably ordered them with my taste in mind, thinking about what would really make me happy.

In which case, he might have thought the same applied to this necklace.

For the wedding reception of an esteemed house like this, it wouldn’t do to dress plainly. My father and mother had done their best to provide everything I needed, but at the end of the day, House Clarac had rather limited financial means. If I was dressed inadequately at the reception, there would no doubt be people ready and waiting to laugh and lash out with their underhanded barbs.

Has he been thinking a tad too hard about that, perhaps? Is he keen to prevent me or my family from incurring any embarrassment? Maybe the implied message is that I should use this jewelry as a tool to facilitate my marriage into his family.

I sat up straight, cleared away my writing paper, and took out a card to use for my reply. With a smile, Natalie went to find a vase for the flowers.

Staring at the blank card, I mulled over the appropriate way to thank him given the circumstances.

I wrote, "Thank you most kindly for the wonderful gift. Such extravagant jewelry seems like more than I could ever be worthy of, which does make me rather nervous. However, I intend to wear the necklace and earrings at our wedding reception along with the ring."

The reply that arrived was as follows.

"I struggled to think of a decent gift for you, so I apologize for choosing something so conventional. Diamonds are the birthstone for April, and though they're colorless, they sparkle dazzlingly, so I found myself reminded of you. I'm sure they'll suit you perfectly, and I can't wait to see you wearing them."

"I take it all back," I cried. "He really had no idea, did he? What about this jewelry is *conventional*? In what way, shape, or form will they *suit me*?! That man has more money than sense!"

As I raged, my family and the servants wore highly strained smiles. Thus passed the last spring of my unmarried life.

Simeon

With my fiancée's birthday fast approaching, I wanted to get her a gift, but I was lost as to what would be appropriate. Being very conscious of my own lack of sense in this regard, I decided to ask my family for advice.

"Girls like stuffed animals, don't they?"

"What about some lovely food?"

I had the impression my brothers were merely suggesting things they liked themselves. No doubt Marielle would have appreciated both, however.

My mother's advice was typically grown-up and practical.

"Forget about everything else. Your wedding is just around the corner, so you should buy her something she can use. What about some accessories that she can wear to the reception? Marielle doesn't appear to have all that much jewelry. The more pieces you can give her, the better."

It was true that Marielle was going to need a variety of accessories to wear in formal situations, but jewelry seemed like an awfully conventional choice.

When I suggested this, Mother replied, “When giving a present, there’s no need to go out of your way to be original. Just imagine receiving an engraved image of some vegetables!”

Father shrank back in the face of Mother’s deadpan stare. Quite honestly, though, that engraving was a fine piece of handicraft. It was jade green, and carved to perfection to look just like the real thing. It was a lucky charm from an eastern land, and would not have looked out of place stored in the family’s collection room.

That said, I can imagine it’s not the ideal gift to satisfy a young lady.

With that in mind, I ultimately decided to take Mother’s advice and buy Marielle a necklace and matching earrings. I then considered that for a birthday present, her birthstone might be appropriate, which in Marielle’s case would be diamonds. They would even go perfectly with her engagement ring.

I ordered the goods from the same place that had made the ring, asking them to ensure it was something a wife could wear with pride in the royal court.

When the finished pieces arrived, my brothers were eager to see.

“Well? What does it look like? Come on, show us!”

When they peered into the box, a dubious expression appeared on both of their faces.

“Oh, I see,” said Noel. “It’s a very high-class design. Yes, it’s the sort of thing I’d expect from you.”

“It’s clear that you spent a lot of money on it,” Adrien added.

Their reactions made me furrow my brow. “Is there something wrong? My aim to find something that would suit Marielle.”

“Oh, really? That was what you were going for?”

“You thought these would suit her?”

That much seemed obvious. I’d never have bought her a gift I didn’t think she’d appreciate. I’d thought long and hard about it before deciding.

“I see. Well, I hope she likes it.”

They seemed to be holding back somewhat, as if they wanted to say more.

In the end, however, Marielle expressed no concerns whatsoever. She even sent a thank you card saying she would wear the necklace and earrings at the reception. As I pictured the sight of that, I eagerly awaited our wedding day.

It's a colorless stone that, at first glance, has no individual character. However, in truth it shines more dazzlingly than any other jewel. That's why it suits Marielle to a tee. On the inside, the woman I love is filled to the brim with dazzling light.

No gemstone could ever be more fitting for Marielle than diamonds. Some might try to suggest otherwise, but even the person herself did not deny it. I remained fully confident in my choice.







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